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OR,
Solemn Saul's Seraph.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "THE RUSTLER DETECTIVE," "NOR"
"WEST NICK," "OLD '49," "DAN BROWN"
OF DENVER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

DEATH AT THE DOOR.

THAT broad glare of white light glowing up and down the poorly-kept street, was no novelty to the eyes of Cale Dipson. In common with nearly every other citizen of that little railway town, he was familiar with that double-faced beacon, which saved fat Chris Gundelfinger an expenditure of paint in advertising his "Head-light Saloon."

A feature of the place when Falcon City was "booming" as only a far western town can boom while being the literal "end of the road," and the basis of future operations: when the town, springing up as a mushroom in a night, glorying in its tremendous rush of business, in its being the catch-all and hold-all of the swarms of gold-scattering adventurers and speculators,

"WAAL, I BE DURNED!" EJACULATED THE GRIZZLY FROM GINSENG. "THE FU'ST BONEYARD I EVER SEE THAT KNEWED HOW TO WALK ON TWO LEGS!"

when, without a thought of the days to come when another ephemeral "city" should mark another stride of the iron horse, the crazy jumble of buildings which the more enthusiastic investors were complacently comparing with those other magic cities by the lakes, the Kaw, and the Black Hawk Range. A feature then, when all was rose-colored; a feature now, when the inevitable collapse had taken place. And let who might despond over the woeful backset, Chris Gundelfinger never once lost his firm faith in the town of his adoption.

"Vhat madders dot? Vhat makes id eff dem leedle willages do sthick der dumbs py der noses und viggel dem vingers dis vhay? Who vhas caring vor dot? Look you pyme, mein vriendt, und tie a pig knot righd vhere I puts me mein vinger town! Dot day vhas coming py-und-py, vhen dis same oldt Valcon vill puild its nesdt righd all oaser dot Shivering Asp, und vhisper its leedle valcon-pirds to pury dot Bed Rock so teepunter dem pones und fedders und tumpings und cold wittles und dings vhat dem dond't haf no more use vor, dot Gapriel pedder bring dose sdeam excawadors in blace off dot horn, off he expects to rose dem beobles ub in dime to shoin in dot sheneral musder! Dot vhas me making mein biccolo vhisdele, mein herr!"

Practicing what he preached, Chris Gundelfinger scorned to join in the excited exodus when the "end of the road" shifted to Bed Rock, and from Bed Rock to Shivering Asp. Falcon City might dwindle and pine to a tenth of its former proud proportions, but "The Headlight" shone still brighter without, looked more cheerful within, flashing earlier and growing later.

Each day fat and jolly Chris rubbed and burished up the twin lamps and double reflectors. And never before had they cast a more brilliant light than on this moonless, starlit evening in early summer, when Cale Dipson paused abruptly in the middle of the unpaved street with a harsh, grinding imprecation which he was unable to entirely stifle in its birth, his eyes gaining a cat-like glitter under the shadow of his slouched hat as they fixed upon the building directly opposite; or, rather on the figure of a young man within that building.

"Allen Bryson! Is it? Can it be? If it is—"

An ugly hiatus, that!

Cale Dipson cast a hasty glance about him, searching the shadows where the side flashes of light from the twin reflectors could not reach—a glance such as no honest-meaning man could give.

He failed to detect the presence of any mortal being, though he was too highly excited for close scrutiny, and the bright light before him might well impair his powers of vision for a time. The street appeared deserted by all save himself, for the night was yet young, and the human owls had not begun their usual flittings in search of "fun" or profit.

Only the one sweeping glance as his right hand stole silently beneath his coat, his fingers gripping tight the corrugated butt of a tried and trusted revolver.

His sturdy figure began to lower and round after the fashion of a vicious feline whose keen senses hint at the proximity of prey. He moved toward the wide-opened door of The Headlight, his burning gaze never leaving that figure, leaning carelessly against the counter, and he fairly held his breath with eager longing to catch a fair view of that man's face.

Allen Bryson, if he it was, stood leaning against the bar, apparently chatting with Chris Gundelfinger, thus having his profile turned toward the door. He was smoking a cigar, and when first noticed was lazily fingering it with his free left hand. This action covered the lower part of his face from those eager eyes, and no doubt prolonged his lease of life.

For there was murder in the face of Cale Dipson as he stole silently toward the threshold, pistol in hand, thumb on hammer and finger on trigger.

The twin reflectors were perched high above the door, casting the space beneath and directly in front into comparative obscurity. Thanks to this arrangement, Cale Dipson was enabled to steal very near to the open door itself without incurring great risk of being discovered by anyone inside the bar-room.

He had eyes only for the young man before him, and it was instinct more than reason that led to his perfectly silent advance. There was still more of the cat in his manner of moving, lifting each foot in turn high from the ground, slowly lowering it, softly feeling the next support with the ball before shifting weight upon it, thus relieving his eyes at the expense of his other senses.

"Show your face, you skulking cur!" came faintly but fiercely through his lips as the dangerous gleam grew redder in his hungry eyes. "Show your face, if you're anything like a man!"

There was little of the cur in either face or bearing of the young fellow who so little suspected how close death was lurking in ambush. Instead, the vast majority would at first glance declare him a more than extraordinary fine specimen of the genus homo, judging from his exterior alone.

Neither tall nor short, but a comfortable mean between those extremes, Allen Bryson was well-built and justly proportioned, unless it might be in having shoulders a bit broader and more muscular than was absolutely necessary.

His skin was dark, but clear, his short hair and neatly trimmed mustache black as the wing of a raven, his eyes, fairly large and not too closely planted together, with just the hint of chestnut in their lustrous depths, lending his face more of good nature and mildness than a purely black eye ever confers.

If not strictly handsome, his face, as a whole, was better; frank, sincere, manly; the face of a strong friend and an uncompromising enemy.

He wore a business suit of dark material, plain but neat in fit and stylish in cut, while his derby hat was of the latest pattern. The light from behind the bar reflected from a simply set brilliant in his scarf-pin, but beyond this one jewel he wore nothing that could declare his real wealth of pocket.

All this the crouching shadow beneath the twin headlights could see, even while keeping eyes riveted upon that partially shielded face, with fierce eagerness waiting for that white hand to drop lower.

"It's he—it must be that devil!" he panted, barely above his breath as he came to a pause only a few feet from the threshold.

Even in his vicious lust for blood, Cale Dipson dared advance no further just then. Even while the most deadly passions seethed and boiled within his breast, he recognized the danger-line.

Like all frontier towns, Falcon City boasted citizens to whom a drawn "gun" was as a red flag to an irritable bull, and Cale Dipson was not yet mad enough to court a snap-shot before he could fully assure himself as to this man's identity.

"Show your face! Show your face, curse you!" he mechanically repeated, each instant of suspense causing his brain to throb more madly!

It seemed an age to his fierce impatience, but it was really only a few scoreseconds that Allen Bryson kept his face shielded by his hand. And then—Cale Dipson caught his breath sharply and lifted his pistol-hand.

Allen Bryson not only lowered his left hand, but he straightened up before the bar, turning his face squarely toward the door, a slight frown gathering his brows and an impatient sparkle filling his eyes.

Had he caught sight of that crouching shape just beyond the threshold? Did he know that his life was in imminent peril?

Cale Dipson believed this, and despite his fierce passions, he involuntarily shrunk away, even as his trusted weapon rose to a level.

He knew that he would be given time for but one shot, if this discovery had really taken place, and he was still cool enough to know that his own vicious passions had shaken his nerves and unslung his arm. Despite his fierce effort to control this, he knew his weapon was wavering far too much for anything like a sure shot.

But, Allen Bryson did not spring forward or to one side, to attack or to escape from the open line of fire, as he surely would have done had he suspected the truth. Instead, he drew forth his watch and touching the spring, consulted the dial, the frown of impatience deepening on his comely face as he noted the hour.

"Waiting for some person! Does he know? Is it more than a cursed chance that brings him to town?"

Cale Dipson asked himself these questions while striving to regain his shaken nerves and old-time steadiness. And though he made no effort to answer those queries, in words, the mere doubts spurred him on to desperate action.

If his hatred had been less intense, his hand would have been steadier. As it was, the silver bead on that dark tube quivered and shifted all over that broad breast, refusing to linger long enough above that heart for the finger to contract.

It was a new experience to Cale Dipson, and he shifted his maledictions upon his own shoulders while striving to conquer his unruly nerves, thus losing the moment which meant all the difference between success and defeat.

Not that Allen Bryson made a move to defend himself, for he never once suspected the truth as he replaced his watch after that impatient inspection. But, other eyes were upon the would-be assassin, and their owner was swiftly if silently gliding nearer that leveled weapon and the man who sought to control its movements.

With an oath that rose above prudence, Cale Dipson lifted and curved his left arm, resting the unsteady weapon across his wrist, thus forming a sure and steady support. And then—

"Sufferin' grandpap, stranger! they's a fly on the bar'l, an' you can't shoot straight—so!" exclaimed a peculiar voice, and a metal-bound staff fell sharply on the pistol, beating its muzzle down just as it exploded. "Mebbe 'tain't none o' my business, but good Lawd!"

With a snarling curse of baffled rage, Cale Dipson dropped his pistol and turned to see a gaunt figure before him. Then, with a swift ducking of his head, he rose again with the

stranger fairly astride his neck, hurling him backward through the open door of the Headlight, to fall in an awkward heap on the sanded floor!

CHAPTER II.

IN SEARCH OF A SERAPH.

THE vicious crack of a pistol was no novelty to the few citizens of Falcon City, then assembled in the Headlight, and its echoes were still ringing through the building when almost every hand grasped a weapon of some sort, their owners surging toward that uncouth missile which came revolving through space to fall with a dull thump before the bar.

"Who is it?"

"Who ketched the lead?"

"Durn the odds! A crack is a crack, an' he's had his'n."

"Don't—mournful Moses! Don't shoot!" gasped the animated heap on the floor, uncoiling enough to elevate one foot with an appealing flutter as the addition came: "Flag o' truce, pard! 'Twasn't me, an' I kin take my 'davy—don't shoot!"

The stranger gave a marvelous twist and squirm that broke the fierce grip of Allen Bryson, but those flashing black eyes had gained their point, and without another look toward the shivering fellow who was cowering near the end wall, he interposed his own figure, waving back the excited citizens with an empty hand as he cried:

"It's the wrong man, gentlemen! I'll go bail for him, and—"

"Who'll go bail fer you, stranger?" bluntly interjected one of the party, but slightly lowering the huge pistol with which he had been striving to cover the human catapult.

"You will, when I swear that I saw the face of the rascal who fired at me by the flash of his gun," sharply retorted Bryson.

"At you, eh? Sure o' that?"

"Take my 'davy, gents," eagerly spluttered the gaunt fellow who had so curiously prevented an assassination, venturing to assume a sitting posture for the nonce. "Right fer his gizzard them battery were aimed, an' ef ye hunt up the bullet, I'm bettin' you'll find his billet cyarved onto it big as a haystack! Ef I didn't know it I wouldn't say so, fer I never larned to lie, an'—"

"Then what're we chinnin' hyar fer?" grated the big fellow, crossing the space with a single bound, and passing out into the night, followed by the greater portion of his mates.

To stop short as they gained the outer air, vainly searching for some sign of the man who fired that treacherous shot.

Not a living person was in sight, outside of their own number. And nothing was to be seen when they dashed to the nearest corner. If the assassin had really fled, he had made good use of the moments afforded by that brief balk.

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no," grunted Big John Hawk, turning about and retracing his steps to the Headlight, casting a passing glance at his huge pistol as he entered that bright pathway of light. "Mebbe that bunch o' bones was playin' it fine onto us. Mebbe—"

They found the "bunch of bones" on his feet, glibly explaining his part in the curious affair, but he ceased speaking at their entrance, half-shrinking behind the sturdy figure of Allen Bryson, like one who knows from past experience the value of such a safeguard.

"Did ye ketch the p'izen critter, gents?" he quavered. "I kin take my davy to him ef ye did, an'—"

"Le's look at your gun, stranger," bluntly interrupted Hawk, holding out his hairy left paw, pistol gripped in its mate with muzzle covering the stranger's person. "We ain't so mighty sure but what we hev ketched him, a'ter all! Show your gun, pardner!"

"You kin hev it ef ye want," murmured the stranger, with a sickly smile upon his long face as he produced a cheap, diminutive toy, sometimes misnamed a revolver, 22 caliber. "Tain't loaded, fer I'm skeered o' the pesky things, an' only tote it fer to keep in the swim."

Intentionally or not, he could not have offered a better or more effectual plea than this. Big John Hawk recoiled with an exaggerated look of horror on his bronzed visage, his huge paw shivering as he motioned the stranger to put up his terrible armament.

"Put 'er up, pard—put 'er back in bed afore she ketches cold an' gits the croup!" he gasped, leaning heavily upon his nearest neighbor. "You ain't the man! Ef that cannon hed 'sploded, they wouldn't be no mo' Headlight, nur never a one o' us this side o' the divide to ax how happened it! Put 'er up—the weenty, teenty, 'little sing!"

"I'll take oath he was not the man," quietly interposed Bryson, with a keen look out into the night as though he half-expected to receive another shot. "I was looking outside just before the shot was fired, and by the flash I saw the rascal's face too clearly to mistake it for that of this gentleman."

"Scribe it, stranger, an' we'll hev a bit o' fun even yit!"

"I'm not so sure I could describe it," slowly

responded Bryson, his comely face growing just a trifle paler and a curious gleam shooting across his eyeballs. "And I'm not sure I'd try. The shot was aimed at my life. Perhaps I prefer hunting the fellow down on my own book."

"Mebbe you kin give us a hint, pardner?" turning toward the gaunt stranger, who was just stooping to recover his metal-bound staff with which he had foiled the treacherous aim of Cale Dipson.

"I'd do it in a holy minnit ef I knowed how, but—"

He paused short, one bony hand rising to his thin face, nervously slipping down to tug at the goat-like beard which covered his pointed chin. His thin lips quivered, his facial muscles worked anxiously and a queer, beseeching light came into his little gray eyes as they roved swiftly from face to face before the words:

"Mebbe—ef it ain't axin' too much, gents! Kin any one o' ye all tell me whar ur how I kin find a female lady called Lovejoy? Seraphina Angelica Lovejoy? Seraph, fer short. Likewise Angel, by them what's into her confidence pritty deep. Built a'cordin' to her names. Ef ye only *mought* be able, gents!"

The bony hand rose high enough to briefly cover those unsteady lips from sight, but not to hide the meekly appealing eyes from view. Eyes that held a light which more or less affected those upon whose faces they rested in question, according to their susceptibility.

Allen Bryson silently shook his head. Others followed his example, and Big John Hawk arched his shaggy brows in mock surprise as he asked:

"D'you reckon this is heaven, stranger? Ef they's a seraph or a angel inside o' Falcon City, he or she'll be branded fer a maverick afore another sun—sure!"

With a long, heavy sigh, the stranger drew a flat package from his bosom, slowly unwrapping its covering until a faded cabinet photograph was revealed, the while meekly muttering:

"No 'fence, gents, fer they ain't none 'tended on my part. I hed to ax it. It's part o' the weary penalty which—"

After a hasty fumbling about his coattails, he crumpled up the well-worn paper wrapping, and vigorously twisted his nose, furtively dabbing at each moistened eye whenever he thought he could do so without too openly betraying his real emotion.

"Ef you'd be so kind as to take a look, gents, an' tharby sorter brusk up the mem'ry o' you all," he muttered, placing the picture into Allen Bryson's hand first, then drawing back a pace or two as he meekly added: "Mebbe 'tain't jest Christian, pilin' temptation into the way o' so many feller-critters, but how kin I help it? How kin I ever hope fer to diskiver the seraph which you'll find the shadder of prented out thar, heap littler'n natur', but true to life ef it ain't nigh so nat'ral? Meanin' fer to say that ef I *don't* ketch her so, how kin I hope fer to find her by my clumsy tongue-paintin'? An I reckon they ain't nobody hyar' but what's too white fer to try to cheat a pore wanderin' pilgrim out o' his sperret-p'inted bride, jest fer the sake o' corralin' the treasure his own lonesome self—be they, now?"

So unanimous a response would have been remarkable, had not the picture itself been taken into consideration, but a single glance at that sun painting explained all. Even Allen Bryson was forced to smile quietly as he shook his head in response to that anxious look.

It was the portrait of one who could scarcely be called young, and certainly not beautiful, despite her poetical names. Unless the camera bore false testimony, Seraphina Angelica Lovejoy was a tall, thin, angular maiden lady of an uncertain age; with two rows of slender, machine-made curls shadowing her long, thin neck; with thin, bony features, the most prominent of which were a very long nose and a remarkably pointed chin. Strangely like those of the querist, by the way!

Struck by this idea, Bryson scanned the stranger more closely than he had as yet found time to do, with the following result:

Six feet and a trifle in height, unless his gaunt angularity deceived the eye, or apparent inches were added by that somber black garb. The long-tailed coat buttoned closely to the chin, with a narrow, standing collar, which covered all traces of linen beneath. Trowsers of the same dead black shade, narrow enough to bear evidence to the slender if muscular legs, meeting cloth gaiters at the bottom. And as he meekly looked from face to face as the photograph went the rounds, the stranger tried to smooth the creases out of his crushed hat, a dead black felt, but modeled after the fashionable "silk topper."

His hair, of a foxy-gray hue, lay sleekly upon his skull. His face was clean-shaven, save for a long, slender goat-like beard on his chin.

Under one arm he carried his staff, polished and metal-bound, with a sharp spike at the lower end. It was too long for a cane, yet too valuable in make and material to be carried for a mere whim.

This curious being heaved another sigh as the picture returned to his hand, without the

longed-for clew, and there was patient resignation in his voice as he spoke:

"I knowed it wasn't no use, but I *hed* to do it, gents—*hed* to! Ef we wasn't sech plum' strangers, mebbe I could tell ye a story that'd harry ye all up endways in your feelin's, but—"

"Wife run away, pardner?" ventured Hawk, with exaggerated sympathy.

"Signed in the sperret, but never recorded in the flesh—wu'ss luck!" groaned the lugubrious stranger, with a longing yet half-resentful gaze at the sun-picture before tucking it into his bosom once more. "Ef I could only find her—but I cain't an' I won't! Fer why? They ain't never sech a seraph on top o' the footstool! They never was any sech! It's all a durned, measley sell—an' yit—I'm bound fer to keep on huntin' an' s'archin' an' wanderin' the wide world over ontel I *do* run ag'inst that wision o' maidenly beauty an' sweetness an'— 'Scuse my coat-tail, gents, but somebody's done prigged my reg'lar wife, when I wasn't lookin'," he bowed, with a melancholy smile, bending his gaunt figure until eyes and coat-tail could connect.

More than half-convinced that the stranger was "cracked," even if not an actual lunatic, Allen Bryson felt a sort of pity and compassion for him, despite his ridiculous words and actions. And in hopes of saving the poor fellow from being made the butt of those rough jesters, he plucked his arm and cheerily uttered:

"Never mind, friend. Care killed a cat. Trust in luck, and drown memory in a prescription such as our worthy Chris knows how to compound. Gentlemen, you will join us, please?"

Such a polite and congenial invitation could not be refused, and only the gaunt stranger held back from the polished bar where the fat host was gravely waiting their pleasure. Even he licked his lips longingly as he glanced over the array of bottles and glasses, but then he brought his polished staff to the front, planting it upright in the floor by means of its spike, a deft touch lowering the silver band and folding the quartered top out to form a velvet-topped table of nearly a foot square. While one hand was thus occupied, the other produced three polished shells, the halves of English walnuts, and a little black pea, all of which he began manipulating deftly as he muttered softly:

"Shell I? Sha'n't I? Shell— Kin I do it? Nickles, dimes an' dollars! Cheat ye ef I kin! Bound to lose, but ye cain't win ef ye don't bet! Shell I— Kin I take a drink? Whar's the little joker? Pull 'im out o' bed, an' rake down yer money, fer—"

The sharp report of a revolver echoed through the saloon.

CHAPTER III.

A CONSULTATION CUT SHORT.

"I TELL you I saw him with my own two eyes! And if he didn't see me, it wasn't his fault; he did plenty of looking, and like a man who felt dead sure what he wanted most to find was mighty nigh at hand, too!"

"And your heels pretty near broke your neck, Ben Brown?" came a clear, musical, yet mocking tone.

"I dodged the devil as quick as I knew how, Sultana; but why? Why didn't I give him one in the neck?"

"Because you thought of your own neck, possibly!"

"I thought of you, and of your orders," with a furtive glance into that handsome face, admiration mingling curiously with anger in both look and tones. "Only for that—"

He bit his words short as the one addressed turned away from him to speak to the tall, graceful figure leaning carelessly against the dingy wall.

"What do you think, Ross? Can we depend on Benny, this bout? You know they *do* say he sometimes sees ghosts, and—simmer down, Brown!" turning quick as thought toward the burly ruffian whose fierce oath cut into her mocking speech. "Show your teeth to me, and I'll play dentist the sweetest you ever dreamt of!"

"If a body will rub a raw back with stiff pickle—"

"More fool that body for having a raw back," still holding him covered with that convenient weapon, a derringer small enough to be almost completely hidden inside the hand that used it, yet carrying a ball heavy enough to let out the life of the most powerful man.

It was a curious scene altogether, and one which deserves a fuller description, particularly as each one of the figures composing that triangular group will have much to say and do in these pages.

The room was a fairly large one, dull and cheerless enough, despite the rays shed around by the lighted lamp. The walls, on all sides, as well as overhead, were ceiled with unpainted, unstained ship-plank, yellow by nature, dirty and fouled by careless usage until the apartment bore a seeming age ten-fold that of the frontier town in which it held a place.

A dirty pine table and four or five broken-backed chairs comprised all the furniture.

Only one of these chairs had an occupant, after the customary fashion, just at that moment: the burly fellow addressed as Ben Brown.

Just now he was leaning back in the seat, his big hands ostentatiously held before him, like one mutely calling attention to the fact that he held no weapons for attack or defense. There was a faint smile upon his face, but it could hardly be termed an agreeable one.

A big, burly rascal, built for muscular power rather than grace or activity; just such a person as one may meet in every group of laboring men where matter rules supreme over mind, and a man is ranked in accordance with the weight of his fist. Yet there was something peculiarly striking about Benjamin Brown, and few men saw him first, without being tempted into taking a second and lingering look.

If hunted down, that peculiarity would be found to lie in his eyes, beyond a doubt. Not that they were blacker, brighter, keener than many another pair to be met with in almost any crowd, but because they were found amid such bit-and-miss surroundings.

His features, though large and heavy, were fairly regular, and might have been called good-looking, only for the strange, dead whiteness of his skin, resembling that of a corpse far more than that of a living man. Add to this, the silken, luxuriant mass of hair and beard, which left little more than eyes and nose exposed to view, fine, flossy, gently waving, its hue of the palest gold, such as one rarely sees save on infantile heads or the newly-silked ears of green corn, and the nature of that contrast may be imagined.

The hair and beard of a saint. The face of an illiterate human machine. The eyes of a professional bravo.

Almost as remarkable, though in a different way, was the slender, graceful figure whose armed right hand held this giant in subjection just then.

A woman, despite the masculine garb and the free-and-easy position assumed: one trimly-booted foot resting on a chair-seat, elbow resting lightly on the elevated knee, the other arm akimbo, and a half-mocking, half-menacing smile curling the silken mustache, which shaded without concealing those red, ripe lips.

A soft felt hat of pearl-gray rested rakishly over her short, jetty curls, a stray lock of which crossed her forehead, shading one of those big, bright eyes. A short, light sack-coat of dark-brown velveteen, marked with broad silken braid, open in front from top to bottom, as if to avoid crushing the mass of snowy ruffles and embroidery which served as shirt-bosom, as well as helped to conceal the womanly contour which else must have betrayed the wearer.

About the round waist was drawn a morocco belt, with loops for fixed ammunition, though these were all empty at present. Below, trowsers of brown velveteen, meeting natty little boots of patent leather, one of them bearing a gold-plated spike at the heel by way of a spur.

A figure which would be impossible off the burlesque stage in the East, but which has many a counterpart in the "wild and woolly" West, though its day has almost gone by, even there.

More conventional, yet a model in his way, was Ross Kearney, sport, gambler, fire-eater as the turn of the card decided, now leaning idly against the dingy wainscoting, his soul in his big blue eyes as they watched the brilliantly beautiful face of Sadia Galway, "Sultana Sate," as she was best known to the inner circle.

Tall, athletic in build, but without the least suspicion of heaviness, with close-cropped flaxen hair, regular feature, heavy, drooping mustaches, and faultless complexion; neatly dressed, with snowy linen, modest jewelry, perfectly-fitting shoes; in a word, the highest type of the professional "sport."

Sultana Sate was speedily satisfied with her exhibition of power, deftly returning the derring to its hiding-place and laughing softly as she uttered:

"Just to show you that curses are mighty apt to come home to roost, Benny! Not that I really meant to perforate your system. You're too precious a member of society for that! We really couldn't get along without you. And so— Once more, Ross, what do you think of it?"

"I reckon it's gospel, Sultana. I had notice of his coming this way, as far back as two days ago."

"Why didn't you say so before, then?" demanded Sultana Sate, with an angry glitter in her black eyes, that lent to them a reddish tinge.

"Was it my fault, Sadia, that I failed to see you since—" the tall gambler began, to pause short as her gloved hand lifted.

"Never mind that. It's business, now. If he is indeed here in Falcon City, Brown, you want to keep a mighty keen watch over that pious little vixen of yours. If Essie—"

"She's in thar!" hastily interposed Brown, in a stage whisper, jerking a thumb over his shoulder toward a door near the rear corner of the room.

"What doing? Why have you shifted her quarters?" frowned Sultana Sate, her dark eyes glowing as she softly brought her foot from the chair to the floor.

"Long o' him!" excitement seeming to corrupt his pronunciation. "Ef she was to ketch a hint o' his comin', an' ef she was to even dream o' the job we're settin' up fer to skin—"

"Bite it off, you idiot!" flashed Sultana Sate, frowning, as one gloved hand swept swiftly past his bearded lips, coming so close to them that their owner mechanically jerked his head back to avoid a stroke. "What if she's listening?"

"I don't reckon she is, mum. She's sleepin' by this time. She had a monstrous restless night of it last night, from her face. I kin take a look, ef ye say so," as he rose sluggishly to his feet, producing a rusty key from a pocket.

Something like a smile flitted across the face of the woman sport at this, and her voice softened as she muttered:

"Under lock and key? Does she know it, Benny?"

"I didn't stop to ax," with a frown, as he moved toward the door.

Sultana Sate caught the key from his grasp and gently inserted it in the lock, unfastening the door with barely noise enough to startle the timidest mouse. Deftly she swung the barrier open far enough to thrust her head and shoulders through, pausing to listen for a brief space, since there was not light enough for her eyes to be of much service just then.

The low, regular breathing was that of a peaceful slumberer, and apparently came from the further side of the dark room; but Sultana Sate was not yet content, judging from her actions.

A silent gesture held Ben Brown motionless at the door, while she turned back to secure the lamp.

With this in her hand, carefully shaded by her broad-brimmed hat, the woman entered the adjoining apartment, pausing only when close beside the low, rude pallet on which the sleeper lay extended. Even then she did not uncover the lamp until she caught the unaltered sound of peaceful breathing, and when the yellow rays were permitted to fall upon the face of Essie Brown, who called this burly, strange-eyed ruffian father, it was only for a few seconds.

Long enough to reveal a singularly lovely face, less brilliantly beautiful than that of the masquerader who hovered above that humble couch, but ten-fold more apt to inspire true love and perfect faith.

"You poor little fool!" smiled Sultana, showing her white teeth briefly before silently turning away with the re-shaded lamp. "If you only knew! If you could only guess! So near and yet so far!"

She closed and relocked the door, returning the key to Ben Brown.

"After all, it can't matter much if she does begin to suspect something of the truth. If your story is true—"

"Am I likely to make a mistake, Miss Galway?" stiffly interposed Brown, his face seemingly a shade more corpse-like as his jetty eyes glowed redly. "Could I mistake that—that man?"

"That father's son, you mean?" with a mocking laugh as she placed the lamp on the table. "Don't be mealy-mouthed, Benjamin, when none but friendly ears are open to catch your words."

There was no response on his part. His lids veiled the fire of his eyes, and one trembling hand rose to cover his silken beard, as though he feared his unsteady lips could betray him through that dense mask.

Ross Kearney made a slight sound with his lips, and flashed a cautionary glance toward Sultana as her eyes swiftly met his in response to the well-known signal.

"Why needlessly mock him?" that glance asked.

"He dare not kick against the pricks!" was the silent answer.

"You mean to keep Essie a prisoner?" turning again to Brown. "For how long? And how will you cover this sudden change in your manner? Up to date you have even championed her cause against all of us!"

"I never thought she'd go back on me so flat!" with an ugly scowl on his peculiar face. "Now—I've loved her and treated her like a queen! I've fit fer her ag'inst you all, an' would a'most 'a' twisted the rope fer my own neck rather than hev her wronged the weentiest bit! An' fer what? Jest this: the ongrateful critter would sell her own lawful daddy to the hangman ef so be it was necessary fer to keep that durned—"

The name which Ben Brown was on the point of pronouncing, was taken from his lips by another.

The front door was burst open without even an attempt to turn the knob, and a red-faced, panting individual stumbled into the room.

"Where's Essie? He's here—Allen Bryson—come for her, too! Curses on his impudence! I'll kill him like a mad-dog!"

CHAPTER IV.

SULTANA SATE.

NEVER were three schemers more completely taken by surprise. Not a sound betrayed the coming of the red-faced intruder, and the first intimation they had of an intrusion came in the shape of that mad thrust of muscular shoulders which hurled the door open, its frail lock shattered as though composed of brittle glass.

The manner in which they received this startling entrance afforded fair evidence as to their different natures.

Ben Brown shrunk back, crouching, cowering, his face half-averted, his eyes filled with terror, his burly figure shivering violently, even while one hand drew a revolver from his belt.

Sultana Sate uttered a faint scream, shrinking for an instant, but rallying as quickly with derring in hand. Only to find herself swept by a powerful arm behind the athletic figure of Ross Kearney, who alone of them all seemed unmoved by other emotion than anger as he confronted the agitated intruder with the icy-cold words:

"You dropped your manners outside, Caleb Dipson. Go and pick them up. There's a lady present!"

"Oh, curse your ceremony!" snarled the intruder, catching his breath as though fresh from a hard or long race. "I tell you—"

"And I tell you—go pick up your manners!" sternly interposed Kearney, one long stride carrying him within reach of Dipson.

His grip fastened upon the would-be assassin, and with a single wrench lifted him clear of the floor, while a mighty effort cast him endlong out into the night, followed by the words:

"If you want to get in, knock at the threshold like a gentleman, and wait for an invitation from this lady before you enter!"

Sultana Sate broke into a clear, merry laugh, but Kearney stood stern and watchful as the burly rascal picked himself up from the dust which lay deep before the door, one hand half-hidden in his breast as he waited, ready to make his lesson in common politeness even more decisive should the occasion arise.

Maybe Cale Dipson realized this readiness on the part of the athletic sport, for, angry as he must have been, after such humiliating treatment, he was careful to hold up his empty hands in the light which came streaming through the open door, before he ventured to rise to his feet. Sultana Sate laughed more merrily at this "flag of truce," and even Ben Brown ventured a sickly grin, though he had bitter cause to fear the resentment of that man. But Kearney stood cold and stern as ever as he pronounced once more:

"Pick up your manners, Caleb Dipson, and knock as though you were really a gentleman desiring admittance to a room occupied by a lady."

"You're putting on a mighty heap o' frills, seems to me!" growled Dipson, as he regained his feet and viciously struck his knuckles upon the door casing. "But—what matter? I haven't time to row with you over it, just now."

"Shall I ascertain if the applicant be qualified to enter, your Majesty?" gravely asked Kearney, bowing low before Sultana.

"Never mind that rigmarole, Ross," stifling her laughter as best she could while adding: "Come in, Mr. Dipson. Don't stand on ceremony, I beg of you!"

"Where's Essie, you pasty-faced rascal?" viciously demanded the ruffian as he entered, flashing an angry glance into Brown's face.

"In bed and asleep, where else?" with a faint assumption of independence, inspired no doubt by the scene which he had just witnessed. "You don't want me to rout her out to receive company in her nightgown, do you?"

"See that you keep her just that safe, then, until—Sultana," his florid face paling a bit as he turned abruptly toward the woman in masculine garments. "That cursed rascal has traced us out!"

"Well, what of it?" was the slow query, as the woman feigned a yawn, only partially hidden by a gloved hand.

"What of it?" he echoed, his eyes protruding.

"You're an admirable echo, Dipson," with a languid smile, "so far as mere words go, but I trust my voice is just a trifle less—may I say it?—whisky-burnt!"

With a desperate effort Dipson smothered his hot passion, probably warned by a cold cough from the door, where Kearney was using a chair as temporary lock in the shape of a prop.

"Such as it is, my voice ought to make you comprehend that Allen Bryson is in Falcon City, Miss Galway! Do you understand what that means? Here—Allen Bryson!"

"Is that all?" with arching brows. "What is there so marvelous in that fact, Mr. Dipson? I've been expecting the gentleman any time during two weeks past!"

"You? Expecting him? Allen Bryson?" gasped the burly fellow, visibly staggered by that cool announcement, yet unwilling to trust the evidence of his own senses.

"Precisely, dear boy," with a tantalizing bow, under cover of which her magnetic eyes flashed a warning glance toward Kearney.

"Expecting him, simply because I sent him word to come in all haste."

"For what—why—"

"And to make assurance doubly sure, I took pains to add that Miss Essie Brown was residing in Falcon City, and possibly might be induced to recall her hasty decision, if—"

Her sentence was never finished, for the mad rage which filled Caleb Dipson to overflowing cut her short.

"You did this, curse you!" he panted, hoarsely, seeming about to dash his clinched fist into that insolently smiling countenance. "Then I'll play even! I'll blow the gaff! I'll break up the whole gang and railroad you into the pen!"

A strong grip cut off his hot threats, and he was twisted from his feet to fall heavily on his back. Ross Kearney deftly disarmed him, pressing one foot heavily upon his breast as he spoke:

"Shall I, Sultana? Say the word, and I'll pin his foul jaws together with his own knife!"

He held the gleaming blade in readiness as he uttered the words, and unless his face belied his inclinations, he was more than eager to receive the permission he craved from those red lips.

There was no immediate answer. Sultana gazed languidly down into that flushed but slowly paling face, seemingly debating the matter. Long enough for Cale Dipson to grow cold and shivery with fear. Long enough for his mad rage to die out and be supplanted by craven terror.

"Don't say it!" he gasped, unsteadily. "I didn't mean it—I'll take it all back! I ain't fit to—Hold him off, lady!" his voice rising almost to a shriek as Kearney bent swiftly over him.

Not to drive the gleaming blade home without further parley as the thoroughly cowed ruffian fancied, but to press a strong hand over his lips, with the cold words:

"Silence, you cur! Wait for her Majesty to decide your doom!"

"Her Majesty is inclined to the side of mercy, for once," laughed the woman, her dark eyes sparkling with malicious enjoyment as she gave a sign that caused Kearney to rise and draw back, permitting the humiliated ruffian to regain his unsteady footing. "But, don't try that on again, Caleb, unless you are longing for a swift slide down to—ahem! Once is a great plenty, but you sorely needed the lesson you have just received. For a good while you have been trying on frills and scallops entirely unsuitable to your complexion."

"It was a rough joke, Miss Galway, but—"

"Who said it was a joke?" with a swift frown and haughty cresting of her head. "Would I utter a lie, even in jest?"

"But you said—"

"That I sent Allen Bryson word as to the present whereabouts of Essie Brown. That I bade him come to Falcon City in hot haste. That I have expected him for two weeks past. Must I repeat it all over for your especial benefit, Caleb?"

There was no response in words. Cale Dipson felt those big blue eyes watching his every motion, and he dared not invite another grip of those white but muscular fingers. Yet there was venom in his veiled eyes, treacherous revenge in his swelling heart.

Sultana laughed mockingly as she watched his face, reading below the surface as plainly as though his body was made of glass and his thoughts in boldest type.

"If you were a rattler, how quickly you would strike, Caleb!"

"Is it such a wonder?" he forced himself to reply. "You know how long, how madly I have loved Essie. You know I've been promised her hand in marriage, as security for my silence. Now—you needn't grin and chuckle, red-hand!" he grated, turning upon Ben Brown in hot fury. "If I lose Essie, you'll lose more! I'll string you so high in air that the blue-birds'll nest in your hair!"

"Simmer down, please," coldly commanded Kearney.

"Good advice, Caleb," laughed Sultana Sate, with complete change of manner. "To which permit me to add: treasure this little lesson, and whenever you feel inclined to mount your high horse, look it over and—don't!"

"Then you didn't—you don't—"

"I did, I do," with a mocking smile. "But—after the rich pigeon is plucked by the eagle, what's to hinder the sparrow-hawk from feasting on the fragments? Or, as you seem uncommonly stupid this evening, let me put my meaning into still plainer words."

"Allen Bryson is over head and ears in love with our dainty little lady-bird. Allen Bryson is rich—disgustingly rich, I may say! And so—we've got what Allen Bryson holds above all price. He has what we banker for above all else earthly: money galore! What's to hinder us from swapping our treasure for his riches?"

"Am I nothing?" demanded Dipson, his hot rage flashing out once more. "I'll kill the dandified cur, if you murder me the next instant!"

"Which we most assuredly will do, unless you properly time your slaughtering act, Caleb,"

nodded Sultana Sate, coolly. "If you try it on before we scoop in the ducats, I wouldn't give a wormy fig for your lease of life. But if, on the contrary, you act a wee bit sensible—well, that's a horse of another color. Kill, and drink your fill!"

"I'll never stand by and see him marry the girl I've picked out for my own wife," sullenly growled the ruffian. "Not even you have authority over me so far, Sadia Galway!"

"I ought to have," growing colder, her dark eyes beginning to glow with a dangerous light which, after what had already happened, should have warned the fellow of his peril. "If I have not so much, it is time you were looking around for one more fit to govern you."

"In anything but this!" muttered Dipson.

"In all things where your own fancies do not come into collision with the good of the family! Why not say it, Caleb?" drawing her lithe figure erect and fixing him with her hard, brilliant gaze. "If I knew you were in your sober senses to-night! If I could be sure it was not bad whisky that wags your tongue! I don't want to be too harsh, but in this matter you've got to yield a step or two for the general good. If not—Ross Kearney?"

"Your Majesty?"

"You at least are wholly loyal!"

"Put me to the test, Sultana, if you doubt my perfect fidelity."

"If I were so say: this member is rebellious; what would you do?"

"Crush him into submission, your Majesty," was the reply.

"And you, honest Benjamin?" turning swiftly toward Brown.

A faint flush of color crept into that corpse-like face, and its owner cast a covert glance toward the man whose stubbornness gave rise to these questions. Dipson scowled at him savagely, but Brown whipped out an ugly-looking knife and hoarsely muttered:

"I'd seal his lips forever with this, Sultana! Only try me!"

CHAPTER V.

THE GRIZZLY FROM GINSENG.

At the instant the second shot from the open door of the Headlight rung out, the melancholy seeming stranger was deep buried in his whimsical incantations over the velvet-topped table, droning forth his stock phrases with a glib readiness that went far to prove the words were part and parcel of the actions; both those of the modern thimble-rigger.

He raised one of the shells between thumb and forefinger, revealing the little black ball lying snugly beneath, when the shot was fired, the shell flying to fragments as the lead sped by to bury itself deep into the solid wood of the bar.

With a sharp cry as of pain, the thimble-rigger shook his hand, then thrust the tingling members into his mouth, child fashion, shifting his weight from foot to foot with ludicrous haste, until his movements almost merged into a double-shuffle.

All this was nearly simultaneous, and the startled citizens of the decaying town had barely time to shrink back from the line of fire, before a fantastic figure shot in through the open door, accompanied by a loud and deep roar; no other word can express it.

With an intricate flourish of arms and legs and shaggy head, the creature came to a pause near the center of the room, following up his realistic roar with the words:

"Hyar I be, big as life an' twice as purty! Gabe Gunn, tae Grizzly from Ginseng! Gunn by name, an' gun by natur', fer I was born that way, an' come into the world kickin' with both heels! I'm a son of a gun ef I tell ye a lie!"

He paused long enough to fully fill his lungs, then burst into a roar of which even his namesake, the untamed grizzly, need not have been ashamed. Its volume fairly filled the saloon, making the glassware behind the bar rattle and shiver. Its truth to nature sent more than one cold chill along spinal columns, and their owners to shrink still further away from its author.

The gaunt tumble-rigger alone did not give ground, seemingly petrified in his tracks by that fantastic vision, his lips parted and his lower jaw fallen, just as they had been left when that booming roar shook his shell-stung finger and thumb from their instinctive refuge. But only thus until the little gray eyes could fairly make out the shape to be human, when the jaw closed with an audible click and the fingers helped to form a bony fist.

"All wool an' a rod wide fer good measure! Forty-four caliber when a friend looks at my bore, but ef it's an enemy, I spread out big enough fer a eight mule team to cut a circle into an' never graze a hub! I'm loaded with peaches an' cream in peace, but I'm a geyser o' hot shot an' iron punkins when the dogs o' war bu'sts tha'r chains an' howl fer fresh meat on the buff! Gunn by name an' gun by natur', shiftin' to grizzly when the sign's right an' the moon is on the wax! Grizzly Gabe, right down from Ginseng, an' ef ary one o' ye think they's moss on my tushes, come an' open my head—wow-ooh!"

With a bearish snort and clumsy caper, the self-styled grizzly struck a position under the

lamplight, glaring ferociously around the room, seemingly debating in his mind at which end of the semicircle he had best begin his devastating assault.

Tall, broad-shouldered, a model of muscular power and pantherish activity, so far as outward semblance went, Gabe Gunn looked an awkward customer to tackle, provided his mental gifts were equal to his physical endowments.

His face looked bold and manly, despite the air of braggadocio assumed for the occasion. So far as could be seen through the hairy mask which he wore, his features were strong but regular. Of these, little more than the long, straight nose, full forehead and gleaming brown eyes could be distinguished. The rest lay hidden under his amber-hued beard with which mingled shaggy locks from his large head, all bristling and staring, with a peculiar curl not unlike the under-coat of the ferocious animal which he had seen fit to represent.

A felt hat of the regulation "cowboy" pattern rested on the back of his head, the broad brim pinned up in front with the image of a bear, another representation of which was embroidered on the bosom of his blue flannel shirt, the figure standing out clear and distinct in natural colors, even to the red lips, the white teeth and the beady black eyes.

About Gabe Gunn's neck hung a collar of bear-claws, polished and strung, backed by a leather setting, and to still further elaborate his fantastic fancy, his revolver scabbards were made of the hind paws of a bear cub, tanned with hair and claws as they grew in life.

Such was the picture noted by those assembled in the Headlight, and though there were a few "bad men" present, including Big John Hawk, not one of them showed positive signs of a desire to join issue with the new-comer, "chief" though he was proclaiming himself, in a strange camp. Not that they actually showed "the white feather," after the first instinctive recoil, but each man contented himself with gripping a weapon, waiting for what might come next.

Gabe Gunn glared ferociously from face to face, his muscular paws resting on his hips in convenient proximity to his pistols, but as he detected no signs of a counter demonstration, his beard began to bristle in a broad grin as he added:

"I'm the ontamed Grizzly from Ginseng when they's fresh blood to be lapped, but when all's serene ye kin call me the Seraph o' the Sierras! An' ef—Hellow, critter!"

He broke off abruptly and flashed a look upon the thimble-rigger, who stalked toward him with a strange, sickly smile contorting his thin visage. The figure in black paused to bow meekly, his voice faint and indistinct as the words came from his lips:

"Did you shoot, stranger? Was it you that bu'sted my shell, jest a bit ago? An' ef so, did ye raally mean it?"

"Waal, I be durned!" ejaculated the Grizzly from Ginseng, craning his head, squatting until his hands rested on his bent knees, his eyes dilating with real or feigned amazement as they ran up and down that gaunt figure. "The fu'st boneyard I ever see that knowed how to walk on two legs! Be I ha'nted, or is it actilly a livin' fact?"

"Funny, ain't it?" meekly ventured the thimble-rigger, with a smile still more sickly, but still persisting: "I hate to say it over, boss, but ef it was you that shot my shell—"

"Eh? Oh! Did I? Waal, I reckon, critter," with a long breath as he rose, erect, once more.

"Didn't ye hold it up fer a mark? Ef—"

He was not given time in which to complete that sentence, for one bony hand closed upon his brawny neck, the other struck sharply against his breast, pushing him suddenly back, to trip and fall over the foot which the thimble-rigger locked around his heels.

He struck the floor on the broad of his back with a jar and thud that sent the bottles to dancing a jig behind the bar, and the glasses to rattle where they stood.

And almost before his muscular figure had fairly measured its length, the thimble-rigger was sitting astride his stomach, one hand gripping his throat, the other thrusting the muzzle of the big fellow's own revolver into his face, coldly crying:

"Beg pardon fer bein' so fresh, critter, or Ginseng kin go into mournin' fer its stray grizzly! Spiel, or croak, Gabriel!"

"Now I will be durned!" gasped the amazed bully.

"Wuss then that, 'Tatur-popgun," grimly commented the thimble-rigger, facetiously rubbing his nose with the pistol as he added: "Open your head 'cordin' to order, or I'll hev to open it my own self, in my own way. You tuck fu'st shot; shell I take the last?"

"Es true es I'm a seraph right from—"

"Good Lawd! an' I was nigh fergettin'!" spluttered the thimble-rigger, dropping his confiscated revolver to thrust a hand into his bosom, bringing forth the faded photograph of his lost divinity, thrusting it almost against the nose of the bully, tremulously demanding:

"Ever see that? Whar is she? Whar kin I find her? Tell me—"

With a sudden convulsion Gabe Gunn tossed

the excited wanderer fairly over his head, leaping nimbly to his own feet, snatching up the fallen pistol as he did so, his laugh ringing out loudly:

"Up the ontamed grizzly flops, an' down goes your apple-cart! I could stan' the gun, but when you comes at me with a weepin' like them—then I've got to kick, an' kick hard!"

"Dot vhas blendy 'nough alreaty, mein goot vriendt," rumbled Chris Gundelfinger, as he came rolling out from behind the bar, gripping the hickory handle of a bung-starter. "I likes me no racket mein blace inside of, but off dot prass pandt vhas pound to blay, den I vhas der drum-major! You makes dot glear in your mindt, nein?"

Gabe Gunn faced this fresh actor on the stage, staring wildly, dubiously rubbing the tip of his nose with the silver bead on his revolver, then slowly uttering:

"I know what ye say, boss, but durned ef I kin make out what ye mean! Is it a riddle?"

"I say dot all oafar some more, mit some leedle tifferance, mein goot vriendt," bowed Gundelfinger, with exaggerated politeness, such as those who knew the fat host best had learned to beware. "I vhas an orterly man py mein-zelf. I vhas room me an orterly blace so long as I vhas let be. But when dot row vhas kicked oop, den I sblits me vide open und goes in all my veight mit dose pung-sdarders—like dot!"

The ugly weapon whistled through the air, aimed with honest good-will direct for the shaggy pate of the stranger, and had the blow fairly connected, Ginseng might indeed have gone into mourning for its wild and woolly offspring. Only a most unbearlike leap saved Gabe Gunn, and as Gundelfinger quickly recovered himself to renew the attack, the fellow flung up an open hand, hastily crying:

"Flag o' truce, boss! The grizzly's crawled into his den, an' they ain't nobody but the seraph left on deck."

"Seraph fer short. Angel by them what she 'mits to the inner circle," dolefully uttered the gaunt wanderer, looking about him with a dazed and bewildered air as he slowly rose to his feet from the corner into which he had been so unexpectedly flung.

Gabe Gunn caught at the opening, and with a broad grin held out his muscular paw as he exclaimed:

"Shake, pardner! It was all a joke on my part, an' I don't hold no grudge fer the leetle back-set you lent me. Es fer the shell—"

He stopped short as the thimble-rigger groaned hollowly.

"They ain't no sech critter—don't I know it? An' yit—I've got to do it ef it takes a leg."

Brushing the dust from the photograph, to which he had clung all through his ugly toss and tumble, he meekly thrust it under the reluctant eyes of the Grizzly from Ginseng, dolefully uttering:

"Kin you say whar I'd best look fer her, stranger? Seraphina Angelica Lovejoy. Seraph fer short. Angel by them what's—Eh?"

"Ef I was to jedge by them featur's, pard, I'd say go whar the kittycombs grow, an' the pyram-ids tuck root in the eternal sands! Ef the sun didn't tell a lie, then you're losin' time loafin' in this kentry, fer it wasn't diskivered nigh airly 'nough."

Even Gundelfinger joined in the general laugh which greeted this mock-earnest speech, but the thimble-rigger only gazed reproachfully into the face of the shaggy mountaineer, his voice sadly meek as he uttered:

"Ef you only knowed! What's fun to you is mighty fast gittin' on to death to me. But—waal, what is to be hes got to come!"

He turned away with a doleful sigh to where his metal-bound staff still stood upright in the floor, securing the ball and remaining shells preparatory to closing his ingeniously contrived table.

"Cheer up, stranger! Care killed a cat, they say. Have a drink?"

CHAPTER VI.

HOW TO SKIN A GRIZZLY.

As Gabe Gunn uttered these words, the thimble-rigger started nervously, glancing toward the door as though he expected another leaden salute; but he quickly recovered himself, casting a wistful glance toward the bar, behind which the fat host had again installed his vast corporeity, grave, bland, all serene once more, now that the incipient row had been quelled.

"Ef you're teetotal temprance, pardner, why just take fo' fingers o' whisky straight," gravely amended the Grizzly from Ginseng. "They ain't nothin' overb'arin' 'bout me! Any man kin take his own choice ef he likes, jest so he drinks what I drink an' keeps the same tally."

"Tain't that, but—" hesitated the gaunt figure in black.

"Chop the butt off an' save it fer a back-log ag'inst cold weather," impatiently cut in Gabe Gunn. "I ax ye to drink, an' I'd ax ye mo' politely ef I knowed what your name was."

"Saul Sunday, 'f ye've no 'bjections, mister," bowed the thimble-rigger. "Solemn Saul I'm sometimes called, by those who can't—but no matter!" with a doleful essay at cheerfulness. "Time was, an' time may be ag'in! Time was

when I knowed how to ruffle with the best o' pure-bred gamecocks! Time was when my walk run the bull len'th o' the San Saba walley, an' never a crow come back in answer to my challenge! An' ef I kin ever find my weenty, honey seraph—but you said wet, stranger?" briskly bringing forth his shells and his little pea again, with a substitute for the shattered cover, deftly manipulating the articles as he muttered, more than half to himself: "I hev to do it, don't ye see? It's part o' the cuss them pizen sperrets sot onto me when I was fool enough fer to— Over an' under, top an' bottom, here an' thar she goes, an' the human eye never lived that kin keep track o' the dainty leetle joker when Solemn Saul lays hisself down to work in sober airnest! But—the ole man is mighty dry, an' he wants to win; wants to win mighty bad! An' so—thar's the little joker! An' I'll take mine without, boss!"

Leaving the black pea uncovered on its velvet couch, Solemn Saul turned briskly to the bar, eagerly grasping the decanter and pouring out a generous portion of its contents into the nearest glass.

"Hyar's heap sight better luck then I ever run up ag'inst pard," he nodded, his little gray eyes meeting the brown orbs over the glass.

Gabe Gunn nodded in return, but even while emptying his own glass, his gaze wandered curiously toward the little table planted in the floor. Evidently he had never before encountered the like, and his untutored mind was interested in what he had already seen, for he said:

"What mought ye call that outfit, stranger?" Instantly the cheerful light faded out of that gaunt face, and its owner was once more Solemn Saul, the man of unlimited woes.

"A cuss to me what's forced to tote it the wide world over, Gunn! An' a double cuss to them what is crazy 'nough fer to buck ag'inst it with thar good money, thinkin' to win a fortin fer nothin'! That's jest what I calls it, Gabriel."

"Waal, I be durned!" snorted the mountaineer, bending over the ingenious outfit, then gingerly picking up the shells and the little ball in turn, acting as though he was strongly tempted to try and imitate the deft actions of the thimble-rigger, but refraining, with an unusual accession of bashfulness. "You don't mean to say—gamblin', eh? With them things? Ef you ain't jokin'—be ye now, pard, honest?"

Solemn Saul gave vent to a hollow groan as he slowly and with seeming reluctance advanced to the little table, disgustedly muttering:

"Nother man roped in, an' I cain't help it. I've got to do it, an' me wisin' ag'inst the hull durned swindle. An' the more I warn 'em, the deader sure they be that they kin beat a critter at his own game."

"Then it is really a game?" persisted Gabe Gunn, catching the last word, his brown eyes beginning to glow with the true gambler's fever, a hand slipping into his pocket the while. "'Tain't jest a toy fer to muse the kids with?"

Solemn Saul gazed half-indignantly into that shaggy visage.

"Did you ever monkey with a buzz-saw when it hed business somewhar an' was in a hurry fer to git thar, stranger? That's the kind o' cat this 'toy' is, an' the more ye keep away the less ye'll git scratched. I'm tellin' ye honest!"

Gabe Gunn flung back his head and fairly shook the ceiling with his laughter.

"An' me, the Grizzly from Ginseng! Me, the Seraph o' the Sierras! Me, what putt on my Sunday-go-to-meetin' rijimentals an' moseyed down to civilization jest on puppose fer to tackle the royal bengal in his den! Me, to git way back in skeeryation from a weenty black ball an' a couple or three wormy shells what's lost all thar meat? Stranger, ef I didn't know ye was foolin' fer fun, I'd pritty nigh git mad; I jest would, an' I couldn't help it, nyther!"

"Don't I know it?" groaned Solemn Saul, his gaunt figure bowed over his little table, his long fingers mechanically manipulating the tools of his cunning craft. "Hain't I see'd an' heard it time an' time over 'thout eend? An' the more I warned 'em the more they wouldn't be shuck off, an' the harder they kep' crowdin' to thar ruination."

And then, apparently forgetful of his smiling, curious audience, his fingers moved still more deftly, until the three shells and the single ball seemed to jump over and under each other of their own volition, wholly independent of his light touch. And in a dull, cheerless monotone he muttered his familiar phrases:

"Hyar she goes an' thar she goes! Keep an' eye onto the little joker, an' when he settles in his hole, don't breathe ontel you kiver him too deep with good money fer to ever git out ag'in 'thout your say-so! Over an' under, top an' bottom. Never wink, fer I'm bound to cheat ye ef I kin! That's the way I makes my livin', an' ef they wasn't no suckers to bite, men like me wouldn't never taste fish!"

"Here an' thar, an' good-night says the little joker," ranging the three shells in an even row

on the velvet table, flinging out his empty hands with an ostentatious flourish as he added in the same tones: "Nickles, dimes an' dollars! A dollar ain't pritty as a eagle, but it gits thar just the same! An' money talks louder then wind, when a pore critter's jacket flops 'round his empty stomick like a bean-sack on a meal-pole! An' my good money says that you cain't onkiver the little joker the fust time tryin'!"

Deftly as Solemn Saul fingered the shells, he apparently made a slip at the very outset, for one of the shells rested for the fraction of an instant on the edge of the black ball, before slipping down to cover it from sight. And no sooner had the thimble-rigger ceased to rattle off his speech, than the Grizzly from Ginseng triumphantly upset that same shell, laughing aloud as the ball lay revealed:

"Cain't, cain't I? How's that?" he exultantly exclaimed.

But Solemn Saul never changed countenance as he drawled sadly:

"Things ain't jest what they seem, an' the little joker wouldn't a'bin thar ef you'd backed your 'pinion."

Gabe Gunn lugged out a fat wallet and swiftly tore loose the band encircling it, his face all aglow, his voice a mingling of covetousness and amused contempt as he cried:

"I'm the biggest backer you ever run up ag'inst this side a mule stable! Name your limit, an' I'll hit ye jest as many times as your rijimentals holds the ducats, pardner! I tended to jump a faro ranch, but this is rich enough pie fer my constitution, ef the bakery don't close its doors too awful sudden!"

"Don't ye crowd me, Gabriel," sadly muttered Solemn Saul, his little gray eyes actually seeming to fill with unshed tears of pity as they gazed upon that fever-flushed countenance. "I'm bound by a vow to skin even a grizzly ef he 'sists onto it, but I hate to begin on a man like you! Fer you look like you'd kick over a clean loss, an' then I'd hev to punch a hole through your hide! Don't make me throw fer ye to-night, ef you—"

"Ef you're skeered to play, why do ye tote the tools?" sneered the other, growing more eager as the thimble-rigger apparently receded.

Solemn Saul hesitated, the implements of his trade in his hand, the other clasping the silver band by means of which the quartered top could be brought together in a tight joint, with the velvet snugly concealed inside the staff. Then a half-angry light leaped into his eyes at the stubborn persistence of the being whom he warned so candidly.

"I'll throw fer you ef you put it in that way, Gabe Gunn, but not afore I tell you plain an' flat-footed that my game is a skiu game, whar you cain't win unless I make it a free gift to ye. I'll rake down every bet you put up, ef you won't take warnin' by this."

Gabe Gunn laughed harshly, his own eyes aglow as he retorted:

"Cheatin' goes, as long as ye keep it hid from my eyes. But let me ketch you cheatin' an' salt won't save ye, pardner! Now—play or pull out an' give better men room!"

Solemn Saul cast a swift, keen glance around him, as though to make sure all present had caught the last words, then a cold, hard smile flitted across his gaunt visage as he responded:

"All I ax is that you won't act a lie by burnin' powder afore you show these gents jest how I do my cheatin', Gabriel. Pass your word over that peg, an' I'll go fer your ducats too mighty quick!"

The required pledge was given, and then Solemn Saul settled down to solid business. Faster than ever flew his fingers, and the keenest eye mortal man ever wore could not have kept track of the little joker through those lightning changes, and even had the game been played with perfect honesty, still the chances would have been two to one against Gabe Gunn, who could only give a blind guess as to which shell the pea rested under. And, as a matter of course, he always guessed wrong, for had each of the three shells been lifted simultaneously by other hands than those of the thimble-rigger, still the pea would not have been revealed.

But after bet the Grizzly from Ginseng staked and lost, with each failure dropping a degree of his scornful assurance, until, as the end drew near, his face was grave and cold and hard enough, in all conscience.

Not that he was what is called a bad loser. Those who watched him closest, felt sure he cared but little for the money lost. His sole chagrin lay in being unable to expose the fraudulent methods by means of which he was being stripped of his golden fleece. But watch as keenly as he might, he could not catch even the faintest clew, and without a fair excuse to back him up in his charges, he disdained to break into the losing game. The laughter of the spectators would cut him still more deeply than all his losings.

Not until his wallet was entirely emptied, bet by bet, did he break the silence which reigned over all:

"That takes my last red, pardner," he said, with ominous calmness, his big brown eyes riveted upon the impassive features of his adversary. "I know you've cheated me from A to

Izzard, but I couldn't ketch ye at it, though I tried mighty hard. Ef I hed—well, you wouldn't skin 'nother grizzly in this world, anyway!"

"You made me do it, pardner," coldly retorted Solemn Saul, letting the shells lie idle while stowing away the last installment of his winnings. "I warned you fair as mortal man could do it. But you knowed my game better than I did. Now—shell I show ye just how I did the skinnin'?"

"Not jest yit," and Gabe Gunn placed his revolvers on the bar. "They're wu'th more, but call 'em twenty-five. Play on, pardner!"

Cold and solemn as before, the thimble-rigger obeyed, a score of seconds sufficing to win the wager, just as all others had been won. And then he grimly uttered:

"Ef you want to try how a fig-leaf rig would pass muster, I'll throw ye fer yer clothes, Gabriel!"

For a brief space there was silence, then Gabe Gunn slowly said:

"Give me one more show. Play me one turn to see which one o' us two critters shell take a pistol-shot at the other at two paces."

CHAPTER VII.

PLAYING FOR UNKNOWN STAKES.

His perfect earnestness in making this astounding proposition could not be called into question by any who heard him speak and saw his face just then, and of them all only Solemn Saul gave no signs of excitement or wonder.

A half dozen voices broke forth, for the most part seemingly eager to further such a novel stake, and Allen Bryson, who, as a complete stranger to all present, besides having particular reasons for not inviting unnecessary attention, felt forced to interfere to prevent what must surely end in an awful tragedy if permitted to take its own way.

But before he could make himself heard, the deep voice of Chris Gundelfinger rose above the little storm, emphasized by the heavy thump of his enormous fist on the polished bar before him.

"Py cracious! I don't sthand me dot, shendlemens! Vhas dis blace a mead-schop? Vhas id here dose putcher-mans dot pull-galf make ready vor der market? Vhas I roon me dis blace schusd meinsel, or vhas you grazzy vools der poss, eh?"

"Take a drink, Dutchy, an' charge it to me," frowned the Grizzly.

"I dakes me dot peer-sdarder von dime more, auver you ton'dt kevit dem voolishnesses mein blace inside of—dot's so!" puffed Gundelfinger, with growing anger. "Vhasn't dem blendy room py der oudsite? Go vay mit you! Dot makes me tiret, alreaty! I gits me madt, und when I vhas madt, I vhas madt all oafel! Donner-wetter!"

"All right," cried the Grizzly from Ginseng, with a short, impatient laugh as he shrugged a broad shoulder toward the indignant proprietor, whose fingers were already closing over the limber handle of his favorite weapon. "We'll take a walk outside. If thar hain't light enough, we'll make a light fer each other. How, critter? Kin you throw me fer a stake like that, or does it melt the grit in yer bones jest to think of it?"

Not a word had Solemn Saul uttered through all this. Busied in securing his winnings, he gave no token that he heard or comprehended the extraordinary wager proposed by the man whom he had, after repeated warnings, "skinned" so artistically. But at this direct address, he opened his lips, his voice mild almost to meekness despite the languid scorn which plainly underlay his words:

"What use could I make o' ye ef I was to win, Gabriel? I ain't a cannibal, an' couldn't eat ye, as a man. As a grizzly, 'tain't much better, fer you're too pritty not to make rank chawin'. Bull-beef 'd be heap better chuck. An' I never yit could see the fun o' punchin' a hole through the p'litical 'conomy o' a feller-man, jest to watch the red water run out. Sayin' nothin' 'bout the expense o' plantin' him when the circus is over."

While uttering these easy sentences, Solemn Saul was stowing away his implements, closing the little table until it stood a simple polished staff, on the top of which he carelessly leaned an elbow as he marked his periods with a bony forefinger.

Stiff and still Gabe Gunn stood, moving not a muscle until the man with the shells ceased to speak. Only his hard-set, tensely drawn muscles and his glowing eyes, now more red than brown, told of his powerful emotions. And his tones seemed under equal control as he spoke:

"All of which comes to jest this: you're a coward! You've stripped me o' all my ding-bats. You've got my guns, even. An' now, with all your tricks o' cheatin' to help ye, you don't dast to throw the little joker fer a pot-shot at a couple o' paces! You're a coward!"

Cold and unmoved Solemn Saul listened to this measured speech, the only trace of emotion showing itself in a ghostly smile as he heard the men behind him moving quickly to either side, with the instinctive forethought of men who know how wild lead is apt to fly at times. But he made no move toward a weapon, showed no

signs of resenting that degrading epithet, even when repeated with stinging emphasis.

"Coward goes, ef my swallerin' of it'll let ye fall any easier, Gabriel Gunn," he quietly, almost meekly responded. "But I ain't coward enough to be driv' into makin' a bet ag'in my wish an' judgment. As fer skinnin' ye, what else could I do? Didn't I say, time an' time on top o' time, that I was bound to strip ye clean to the quick? An' you would hev it jest that way. As fer the money—"

"Durn the money!" flashed the Grizzly from Ginseng. "What I want o' you is jest one more chance fer to even up!"

"As fer the money," coldly persisted the man of the shells, "I didn't want it then, I don't want it now, an' it's all yourn fer the simple takin' back ag'in, ef you'll stoop so low as to 'cept a gift from the han's of a coward."

Gabe Gunn cut him short with a savage gesture, though his face began to flush, as though he felt himself being placed in the wrong.

"Offer it, critter, an' I'll thump thunder out o' ye, ef it breaks up the hull peace o' Falcon City, Big Dutch an' all!" he grated, hotly.

Solemn Saul gave a start, but hardly one of fear. His eyes began to glow and sparkle, his melancholy face to lighten up as he glanced over that really magnificent torso before muttering:

"No, I don't want the filthy lucre, fer it cain't fetch happiness back, nur yit find what never lived nur ever will! 'Twon't lift the cuss them pesky sperrets clapped onto the back o' me, nur yit— Look here, pardner!" his voice filling with poorly-schooled eagerness, one bony hand tapping the grizzly on a shoulder, then slipping down to furtively close over the swelling, quivering biceps. "Kin you fight?"

"I'll give a finger ef you'll only try me a whack!" flashed Gabe Gunn, all eagerness, all ardor, his muscular hands closing into fists.

Solemn Saul may have heard, but he gave no signs of comprehending the full import of that hot sentence. His face worked curiously as he passed his hands over the athlete, pausing for an instant on each prominent muscle, more than once giving a short, harsh chuckle as he did so, with a nod of grim approval.

There was something so queer in his actions, so uncanny in his looks, that Gabe Gunn seemed awed into silence, only enduring that slow inspection by an evident effort of will. Fortunately for him, the end came soon, and Solemn Saul repeated:

"You kin fight, then, Gabriel?"

"Try me an' find out, critter! Ef you want stiffkit fu'st, pick the best man in the house—in all Falcon City, fer that matter—an' ef I don't down him at his best holts, I'll go crawl into my den an' cry myself to death fer naked shame!"

"An' you want to buck the little joker jest once more?"

"One whack, or best in three, jest as you like best," with forced calmness, like one who even yet feared to foil his own hopes by a display of undue eagerness. "The winner to hev a fa'r stand-up shot at the loser, two yards rise."

Solemn Saul gave his goat-like beard a thoughtful tug as he gazed with half-closed eyes into the face of the man who seemed bent on rushing into his grave. Then he quietly uttered:

"Ye ain't forgettin' that no man kin afford to lose sech a bet as that, pardner? Even ef you rule out cheatin', I'd hev two to one the best o' ye at it, mind!"

The Grizzly from Ginseng laughed harshly.

"What's the odds? I'm clean bu'sted, an' a man better be dead then strapped in a kentry like this. Then—mebbe I'll git thar! It wants nerve to throw fer a critter's own life, mind ye!"

"An' ef I was to lose, you'd shoot?"

"Too mighty quick!" was the vicious response.

"At two paces? That means cold meat to a dead certainty," smiled the man with the shells, but driving the spikes of his staff into the floor with a steady hand as he spoke: "I reckon I'll hev to go ye!"

"I protest!" cried Allen Bryson, unable to longer restrain himself now that the crisis seemed actually in sight. "It would be murder! I call on all good and true men present to help me—"

"Und me und mein pung-sdarder!" exploded Chris Gundelfinger, once more coming to the front like a veritable god of war, hot indignation at length overpowering his stupor of amazement at the unprecedented act of headlong folly. "I vhas gidding me madt all o'fer some more! Go dou mein blace outd, rightd away, kevvick!"

"Keep your linen on, boss," frowned Gabe Gunn, but backing out of reach of that ugly implement whose power he had so narrowly escaped once that evening. "All we ax is a loan o' your light to settle the bet. We'll go outside afore don' the shootin', ef ye want."

"You make me some voolishness?" hesitated Gundelfinger.

"Honor bright an' cross my heart," laughed the reckless fellow.

"Den dot vhas all rightd," gravely nodded

the fat host. "I don't like me dose vloer all musedd oop. I vhas kick on dot by itzelf. As vor you, und you, all dwo poth grazzy pull-heads togedder, dot schooding vhas petter as der pest ding you gan make outd. Each vhas pedder deadt as alive, und py dunder!" his honest countenance all aglow as he thumped his huge fist on the polished bar before him. "I vhas like me dot execootioner bosidion mein own zelf!"

"You kin hev it ef he wins," laughed Gabe Gunn, harshly, turning toward Allen Bryson, who was still anxious to interpose in the cause of humanity: "As fer you, stranger, fall to the rear, ef you please. He hed a right to chip in, bein' as he runs the shebang, but they ain't no other critter who kin come 'tween him an' me—that's flat!"

Solemn Saul had opened his table and placed the shells and little joker on the velvet, seemingly content to let the Grizzly battle with those who saw fit to interfere; but now he spoke up:

"I'll give ye the show ye ax, Gabriel, ef ye 'cept my conditions."

"Anythin' but a crawfish, critter," nodded the other.

"Ef you win, all I need is 'nough dust to pay fer plantin' what you leave. That's why I say this: I'll put up all I won o' you, an' the best man rakes it down fer keeps. Ef that best man is you, out goes my light! Ef I'm the winner—"

"I'm your mutton, hide, flesh an' taller!"

"Ef I win, you're my meat, to keep or to sell, as I like? Good as old wheat, an' you cain't begin losin' your property a minnit too soon fer to please your Uncle Fuller!"

"You'll take your shot, honest?" frowned Gabe Gunn, suspiciously.

"I'll claim all I win, pardner, an' never let it slip your mem'ry!" laughed Solemn Saul, his expression lively and animated enough now.

Gabe Gunn said no more, but drew close to the little table, his gaze bent almost painfully upon those twinkling bony fingers as they played with the shells and the tiny ball.

"Here an' thar, over an' under, top an' bottom!" droned the man with the shells, the terrible stake for which he was playing apparently lending his fingers double activity and sureness, instead of shaking his nerves in the slightest degree. "Skin yer eye an' pin it fast to the little joker ef ye kin, fer I'm bound ter cheat ye ef I kin! It's part o' the trade, an' ef I didn't hev it down fine as silk, I'd be swimmin' with the suckers long ago! An' lose you will, fer mortal eye ain't quick enough fer to—all sot, an' the fu'st hoss waits, pardner!"

Without the slightest hesitation Gabe Gunn lifted one of the shells, but only to reveal a blank! And Solemn Saul laughed mockingly as he held up his right hand, exhibiting the pea snugly pressed under the long nail on his little finger.

"Played an' lost an' I'm one hoss ahead! Tricks in all trades but mine, an' I'm the critter that 'vented the word honesty fer the dictionary! Sorry fer ye, pawdner, but I'm gittin' too mighty high-toned fer to navigate in a one-hoss shay! Must hev a full team, or I'd let ye hit the little joker once, jest to chirk ye up a bit! Ain't it easy?" with another laugh, as he strung the shells by a single motion, so sure of winning as to scorn the complicated manipulations so far exhibited, at the same time holding his hands up for examination before Gunn.

For a single breath the man hesitated, but rallying quickly, he picked up a shell, to drop it with a curse.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MAN CONVINCED AGAINST HIS WILL.

CALE DIPSON glared from face to face, his own looking its naturally florid hue as he saw how ready Ross Kearney was to obey Sultana Sate, how eagerly Ben Brown waited for the word which gave him permission to leap upon his unarmed enemy, and pay off old scores for all time with his vicious-looking blade.

A bully by nature, as by training, Cale Dipson could and had fought desperately when crowded, or when he fancied the odds were with him, but he was not a brave man in the correct acceptance of that term. Not even his mad fury at the thought of forever losing the maiden whom he had come to look upon as rightly and wholly his own prize, could nerve him to stubborn rebellion now. Before Sultana Sate could utter his doom, the ruffian broke down, trembling, cowed.

"I knuckle—spare me, your Majesty!" he gasped, sinking upon his knees and trying to clasp his fingers about her knees. To have his knuckles rapped sharply with a little foot as Sultana Sate sneered:

"The third time's the charm, Caleb, remember, and you've had two reprieves already this very evening. I don't know but what I'd better say the word, after all!"

"Say it to me, an' you needn't only whisper!" grated Brown.

"If I thought you could hold that ugly temper of yours under check for a few days, Caleb, I don't know—get up, idiot!" with a frown that drew her jetty brows together, forming a single sable arch. "I'll try you once more, for luck!"

The cowed ruffian rose to his feet, gladly sinking into a chair as Sultana Sate nodded, noticing his unsteadiness on his legs. Ben Brown sunk back with a sulky growl, something of that old hunted look coming back to his eyes, now that his master was fairly reprieved.

"You brought it on your own head, Caleb," coldly uttered the unsexed woman. "We're playing for too big a stake to risk losing the first move through your hot jealousy. I know just how you feel over it. I know just how crazy the bare idea turns your brain. Lucky for you that I do know it, too! Only for that knowledge you would be over the range before this!"

"Then—must I give up all hopes?" ventured Dipson, unsteadily.

"That is as your conduct deserves," nodded Sultana Sate. "Does a ripe peach taste any the less sweet and juicy because another hand plucked it from the bough? Does its flavor sour if in that plucking a bit of the bloom is brushed off?"

"Wouldn't you rather take the first bite?" ventured Dipson. "If another was to bite first, then offer the remnant to you, would you take it as gladly as if you had the whole peach?"

"No doubt," with a careless laugh, "but it's your pet peach we're talking about, and my tastes don't enter into the matter at all. Still, you know your remedy. Fly out again, and you'll never care who plucks that dainty fruit, Caleb!"

She paused as if to give him a chance to reply, but Dipson maintained silence. His lesson was too recent, too thoroughly learned for him to forget it so soon, no matter what he might do in the time to come.

"Or, if you so bitterly dislike second-hand fruit, Caleb, what do you say to abandoning your claim altogether? Take your choice."

Dipson mumbled something about being bound to submit to her will, and Sultana Sate appeared content without pressing the thorn deeper. Her tone changed, a smile came into her face, and she seemed to look upon him as a man rather than as a snarling cur to receive chastisement.

"That's all right, Caleb, and we're hand in glove once more. You needed the lesson, and I administered the dose. Now—play the part assigned you, and I promise you your peach, plucked by your own hand!"

"Then—you've only been playing with me?" hoarsely demanded Dipson, his face flushing hotly, his eyes glowing once more.

"A bit of sport that would have turned to deadly earnest if you hadn't bent your stubborn neck, my good man," nodded Sultana Sate, with a gleam of her white teeth beneath the dainty mustaches. "And that will yet come to pass, unless you keep a damper on that infernal temper of yours, too! Will you? Can I trust you, even yet?"

Caleb Dipson nodded assent. He dared not do otherwise, for he knew only too well how gladly Ben Brown would murder him if he felt himself backed by the authority of Sultana Sate. And though he was doomed to suffer much more, he held his vicious passions in subjection so well that even her keen eyes were deceived.

"The thought made me hot, your Majesty, but the best of us hate to be jeered at by a woman, least of all by one so—"

"Come to order, Caleb," sharply interposed the other. "When I don the unmentionables, I become a man, to all intents and purposes. Please bear that in mind, will you?"

A silent bow was his only response.

"As I was about to say, this silly pigeon with the feathers of gold must be thoroughly plucked by those who know better how to use his plumage to the best advantage. In order to do this, he had to be lured within our reach. And what other lure could we use to advantage? What else would have brought Allen Bryson to Falcon City?"

"Nothing, curse him! I only wish there was!"

Sultana Sate laughed softly, yet with a touch of scorn in her tone as she added:

"What matter, Caleb? What if he does catch the shadow, so long as you secure the substance? And this is what the sum total will be, unless you let your hot temper run away with your wits again. Then—but we were talking of Allen Bryson and what must follow his arrival in Falcon City."

"He has arrived! I saw him—"

Dipson bit his tongue sharply, flushing hotly, then paling as rapidly under the keen look which Sultana Sate gave him. He mentally cursed his too ready tongue, but covered the slip as best he might, confiding in luck to keep his part in the Headlight fiasco from her knowledge as long as he remained within her power.

"You saw him? When? Where? How did you leave him, Caleb?" flashed Sultana Sate, her face stern as her tones as she keenly scrutinized the face of her unruly satellite.

"Just as sound as I found him, your Majesty," gruffly. "I had it in my heart to lay him out cold, but—well, I don't always forget your commands, tough though I sometimes find them."

He could not have chosen his words better,

backed as they were by a sullen gruffness. Sultana Sate was convinced that nothing serious had happened, and more easily asked:

"Did he see you? Did he recognize you, do you think?"

"He wouldn't know me if he had seen me squarely. We never met but once, and then he had mighty little chance to study my phiz."

"Good enough," with a nod of satisfaction. "We don't want to open his eyes too early in the game, or he might give us trouble. I call him pigeon, but he has the beak and talons of a full grown eagle. Where did you stumble across him, Caleb?"

Dipson had been dreading this question from the first, but he was afraid to give a crooked answer. He gave Sultana Sate credit for much greater knowledge than she really possessed, and as he recalled how Allen Bryson looked at his watch with all the impatience of a man expecting the arrival of a tardy messenger, he dared not name a fictitious locality.

Even if Sultana Sate should learn of that strangely foiled attempt at an assassination, what could she do more than suspect him? There was no proof against him, and he could stubbornly lie out of the matter.

"I saw him at the Headlight, talking with Gundelfinger. It struck me all of a heap, and my first thought was of Essie! So—Must you use her as a lure any further, Sultana?"

"I really must, Caleb," with a short nod. "We can't afford to cast a single chance aside. And only such a tender lure could hold him as long and as fast as we need. So—you'll have to grin and bear it."

"For how long, if I may ask?" he persisted.

"Until we have plucked him thoroughly, of course," with a little frown. "Must I repeat that lesson, you mulish fellow?"

"I haven't forgotten it yet, but—it comes mighty hard to sit idle and see Essie used after such a fashion!"

Sultana Sate laughed briefly, her red lips curling.

"You ought to thank your stars for that very usage, Caleb. Why, do you ask? Because Essie must have her spirit pretty thoroughly broken down before you can bring her dainty little neck under your yoke. You ought to realize so much, by this time."

Dipson flashed a meaning glance toward Ben Brown, but Sultana Sate shook her head in dissent.

"You've almost worn that string out, Caleb. Another rough touch would surely snap it asunder. But when Essie has played the part with our gold-plumed pigeon, she'll drop into your arms without any further trouble."

"If I could only be sure of so much, even?" with a faint sigh.

"You shall, before the week is dead, Caleb, unless Allen Bryson is much harder to snare than I fancy from what I know of how such a man can love. And when once snared, the rest will be swiftly worked."

"Might I ask how, Sultana?"

"Why not, since you have a part to play in the little comedy? Once in the toils, do you think it will take many hours to extort the pledge to marry Essie Brown?"

"He'd jump at the chance, curse him!" viciously.

"And Essie: well, we'll make her marry him, to save his life."

Cale Dipson shook his head doubtfully, though a gleam of triumph shot across his face despite his efforts to the contrary as he said:

"She'll never do it! She run away from him once—you know why! She'll die with him, perhaps, but she'll never marry him. So—why not make all sure by going through the ceremony yourself?"

The rich color deepened a bit upon her face as Sultana Sate furtively interchanged glances with Ross Kearney, but she laughed softly, carelessly as she made reply:

"Simply because the lines don't read that way, Caleb. If you want a plainer reason, because Allen Bryson wouldn't shell out a dollar, even to get rid of such a disagreeable incumbrance as poor me. And it's his dollars we are after, Caleb, you want to keep prominently in mind."

"If you say so, of course it must be that way," with a poor pretense at resignation. "Say you win that far. Say they are married. Say that you bleed him freely through his pockets: what next, and where do I come in at?"

"What's the matter with a maiden widow, Caleb?" slowly uttered Sultana Sate, with a languid yet pantherish smile playing about her red lips as she watched that hotly flushed countenance.

There was no immediate response. Cale Dipson drooped his heavy lids, a thumb and forefinger pinching his under lip with a nervous, trembling motion. He tried to mask his emotions, but with only partial success, and Sultana Sate frowned darkly as she glanced toward Kearney, mutely asking his opinion.

That was promptly given: an answering frown, a shake of the head, a silent movement of the lips which distinctly shaped the words:

"Dangerous!"

Another silent signal caused him to move to-

ward the door, and Sultana Sate innocently exclaimed:

"Going, Kearney? Well, suppose you make it convenient to take in the Headlight by the way?"

"Just what I intended, your Majesty," was the quick response, with a low bow before removing the chair from the disabled door.

"Wait a bit, Caleb," as Dipson rose to his feet. "I can't spare you just yet."

CHAPTER IX.

SAUL SUNDAY'S SERAPH.

ONCE again had those adroit fingers baffled his eyesight, for the space of velvet uncovered by the uplifting of the shell was vacant. For the last time had the cunning little joker eluded him.

The deeply-interested spectators caught breath in unison as they fully realized all that this meant, and those who stood nearest to the Grizzly from Ginseng, even shrunk away as though there was already a corpse-like odor in the air.

"Vhas a peedy!" muttered Chris Gundelfinger, slowly wagging his bald pate to and fro as he witnessed the result. "Vhas a peedy dem pull-headt grazzy vools neffer bodth lose, und den all der resdt vins py losin' dem—dot vhas mein toot, unnyhow!"

If no other purpose was served, that speech, so full of half-resigned disgust, broke the brief spell which had fallen over the two principal players in the game for life or death, and Gabriel Gunn picked up the other two shells, laughing harshly as the little table lay entirely bare, the little black ball being nowhere in sight.

"Did ye ever try to figger out the percentage 'longin' to the sharp as dealt this snap, pardner?" he asked, with a sneer.

"Waal, not jest that," drawled the winner, with even greater coolness, and his gaunt visage was briefly lit up by a fleeting smile. "But ef I hed to make a try, I know which side o' the table I'd hev to fill with goose-aigs! But that don't count, fer cheatin' goes, an' you was the fust to say as much!"

"That's all right, an' when I begin to kick, you kin set up a squeal. I'm your mutton, an' you kin begin strippin' my hide jest as sudden as the notion sketches ye. But—"

"Chop off the butt an' save it fer a back-log against the cold weather, pardner!" maliciously quoted the man with the shells.

"But—durned ef I wouldn't like to know whar in thunder that pesky lump o' dirt went to!" persisted Gabriel. "Tain't 'long o' the rest under yer claws, fer I looked thar afore I made my guess, an'—"

With a short laugh that wrinkled his fallow face like a frost-bitten crab-apple, Solemn Saul opened his right hand, separating the fingers from each other, one after another, revealing the little joker snugly resting in the hollow at the junction of his middle two fingers.

"But—wall, I be durned!" snorted the Grizzly, in utter disgust. "Ef I'd only looked closer when you held that durned paw out!"

Solemn Saul laughed outright at this, but quickly recovered himself, with a half apologetic glance around before uttering:

"I knowed you wouldn't ef I made the offer, pardner, an' that's jest why which is what! Anything else you want to know?"

The Grizzly from Ginseng drew a long breath, so deep and prolonged as to merit the description of a sigh. He shook his head with a toss that sent his shaggy mane flying in even greater disorder than usual.

"Not a durned thing more, pardner! I reckon you've tuck me clean through the menadgery, an' now the quicker you punch my ticket fer over the range, the sooner I'll git whar all sech pesky fools huddle! Yender lays my guns, an' I'll warrant 'em to do clean work, even ag'inst sech a thick wooden bump as this yer 'cabeza o' mine!"

"It would be basest murder!" impulsively cried out Allen Bryson, as Solemn Saul turned to appropriate the revolvers alluded to.

"It will be bloody massacreation ef you chip in whar ye hain't no call to scrounge, critter!" harshly retorted the Grizzly, his brown eyes flashing redly. "Ef I don't kick, who else hes any right? Not you, stranger, so hold your hush an' let the winner rake in his pot!"

"Jest as you would have done ef I'd lost, Gabriel?"

"Bet your boots, pardner," with a cool nod. "Ef I'd ketcht that little joker, you'd be growin' cold afore this time!"

"Holdt dot gun!" cried Gundelfinger, excitedly. "Oudsite mein blace, off you blease, shendlemans!"

"Time enough, Gabriel," chuckled the man of the shells, as the loser turned toward the open door in compliance with the agreement. "I never said I'd blow ye through ef I won, did I?"

"But—I don't ketch on!" with a bewildered stare into that enigmatical countenance, a curious mingling of anger and relief in his own eyes. "Ef I won, I'd 'a' bored ye too quick!"

"So you said at fust, an' I reckon you would, fer you wouldn't hev no better use fer your winnin's. Now me—Gabriel, you're wu'th heap

more to me livin' then you be dead. Them muskles'd be mighty hard chawin' cold, but ef they'll work to my orders, they'll come in mighty convenient alive!"

Gunn grew sober in face and tone as he slowly uttered:

"All o' which comes to— Spit it out plain, pardner!"

"A put-up job, or I'm a liar!" snorted Big John Hawk, in disgust. "They've bin in cahoots all along, an' jest playin' us fer suckers!"

Gabe Gunn took one stride toward the giant, but stopped short as Solemn Saul lifted a bony finger before his face, coldly uttering:

"You're my property, Gabriel. Hold stiddy ontel I wind ye up an' tetch the spring to set ye goin'. An' you, pardner," with a slight nod toward Hawk, his thin lips curling as he smiled coldly, "kin count on hev'n' the fust chaine to ride the trick mule."

"Nod py mein blace, unnyhow!" growled Gundelfinger, actually looking disappointed at the fading prospects of a fatal shooting. "I vhas sthand too many voolishness already."

Solemn Saul bowed meekly toward the irate saloonkeeper, his voice soft and soothing as he murmured:

"We'll more'n make it up to the house, boss, ef you'll be so kind as to stoop so low as to condescend to let us hev a few more minnits. Tharby hangs a tale, ye want to know, an' sence the gent over yender hes see'd fit fer to fling out a sart'in 'sination, it'd be a pity ef we was hustled out o' the chaine to onbuse his troubled mind—now wouldn't it, your Honor, boss?"

Honest Chris stared helplessly at the glib speaker, his little eyes winking and blinking like those of an owl suddenly startled into the bright sunlight. One hand vaguely wandered toward his bung-starter, but forgot its mission before reaching it.

Solemn Saul deftly floated a bank-note through the air to settle on the counter, accompanied by the words:

"Figger out how many rounds that'll pay fer, boss, an' while you're doin' of it—gentlemen all, an' you in partick'lar, Gabriel!" as he deftly closed his staff once more, using its top as a rest for his gesticulating arm. "Lend me your ears, an' I'll stuff 'em full to overflowin' with the pure, onadulterated truth!"

"Time was when I could crow louder then the loudest, let the comp'ny be 'way up as it mought. That was when I ruled the roost from one eend o' San Saba to the other, with side branches an' sech-like onnumerable an' more too. But then—waal, the sperrets got on top, an' bowed me down under a cuss so mighty big that I'm growin' crookeder in the back every day I live the longer!"

"Shell I—but no!" with a deep sigh and a solemn wag of his bowing head. "I can't fetch me to 'flict sech a long an' melancholy 'cital onto strangers, an' gents at that. Ef I could, you'd git ready fer to fill a bottomless tub with tears o' scaldin' brine an'—"

"R-a-t-s!" came in a shrill, squeaking tone from somewhere among the audience, but no one appeared to know just where to look for the author.

Even Solemn Saul was foiled, though there was a gleaming spark in his gray eyes that told how dearly he would like to pin the insult to the lips from whence it issued.

"You wouldn't mind sayin' that over, an' sayin' it slow, mebbe?"

No answer. The citizens stared at each other, every face grave and even anxious. And after a pause, Solemn Saul spoke again:

"A coward spoke, but mebbe it's jest as well. I was lettin' my own feelin's git on top, fergettin' that strangers couldn't be 'spected to 'preciate all I've hed to suffer. So—business, old man!"

"Business goes," gravely nodded the Grizzly. "I was gittin' tired waitin' fer my ticket, pardner. Ef you could hurry her up a bit."

"You'll hev to grin an' bear it one year longer, Gabriel," chuckled the man of the shells, only a trace of his habitual meek melancholy remaining in face or voice. "You played fer a shot, an' lost. I played fer your life, an' won. Dead, you'd only be an expense. Livin', you kin save me a mighty heap, ef you're good as your looks."

The Grizzly from Ginseng tried to frown, but with poor success. After all, life is sweet, and he was beginning to realize the mad folly which carried him so far. But he managed to utter:

"I counted on your takin' your shot, but—what sort o' heap kin I save ye? Le's hear it out, fust."

"A heap o' kicks an' licks an' thumpin's which hes left me black an' blue an' yaller an' green an' rainbow-colored from top to toe an' all the way back ag'in!" spluttered Solemn Saul in a single breath, his long visage the very personification of disgust at the memories thus revived. "Fer why? Waal, you all see the way I was tuck in this very place. You all see what I hed to ax, hard ag'inst my own free will. An' you all kin 'member that fun an' redicule an' sech like was poked at me an' at the pictur' I

showed—*hed* to show, mind ye!" with a wry grimace as one hand mechanically rose to his bosom where the faded photograph of Seraphina Angelica Lovejoy nestled.

"An' you want me to take the lickin's?" laughed the Grizzly from Ginseng, stretching out his arms and causing his magnificent muscles to rise and fall in unison. "Is that it, pardner?"

"To lick or be licked, with the fu'st fer my choice, Gabriel!"

"In place o' the shot you played fer?"

Solemn Saul nodded assent, and the mountaineer laughed aloud as he leaped high into the air, uttering his extraordinary growling roar as he struck the floor again, once more the reckless "chief" who had created such a sensation by his self-introduction an hour earlier.

"Gunn by name, an' gun by natur'! Forty-four at birth, an' gainin' in dimensions every breath I've drawn sence! Chamber the moon now, an' got one eye on Wenus an' Jewpeter, with a option on the sun ef I kin find any critter brave enough to tetch me off when oncel loaded!"

Solemn Saul held up a bony finger, and the reckless mountaineer instantly subsided, lifting a hand to his shaggy face as he uttered:

"Ready, boss!"

The man with the shells turned smilingly around, leisurely viewing each face within the room, then softly asking:

"Did I hear anybody say rats? Will some one please hint at a put-up job, just once more?"

Big John Hawk flushed redly, but said nothing. Evidently he was not overly anxious to test the muscles of this Seraph of the Sierras.

"I reckon you kin consider it a bargain, Gabriel," laughed Solemn Saul, all melancholy vanishing as if by magic. "You ain't jest the seraph I was huntin' fer, but we can't al'ays hev what we want most."

"Fer a twelvemonth an' a day, boss, I'm your seraph! An' to show ye that I ain't sech a duffer as I look, send somebody to hunt up the best man in all Falcon City an' plunk 'im down afore me! Let him name his own tools or his own pet bolts, an' I'll down him too quick!"

"Have you got any loose change that says so, my dear sir?" came a clear, smooth voice from the saloon door, and turning swiftly in that direction the Grizzly from Ginseng beheld Ross Kearney, coldly smiling.

"Beg pardon, I'm sure," bowing carelessly as he advanced, "for chipping in so unceremoniously, but if there was a limit I failed to catch on. If the game is wide open, my question goes as it lays."

Before Gabe Gunn could utter a response to this polite yet stinging speech, Solemn Saul strode forward, a trembling hand thrusting a bit of cardboard under the nose of the athletic sport, with the words:

"Did ye ever meet the 'riginal, stranger? Kin ye say whar she lives or whar I'd be most apt to find her?"

CHAPTER X.

SOLEMN SAUL TESTS HIS SERAPH.

ROSS KEARNEY recoiled a pace, more in anger than in fear or surprise, his handsome face darkening with a frown as he struck down the soiled card, his tones in keeping with his frown as he demanded:

"What do you mean? Who are you, anyway?"

"Ef you'd ax who I used to was, it'd be heap easier tellin'," with a sad sigh as he stooped to recover the picture from the sanded floor.

"I don't care to hear it. If you're spoiling for a free drink, go ask Gundelfinger for it, at my expense."

Solemn Saul shrunk visibly, but only for a moment. Then, with a long breath that was almost a groan, he again advanced the picture.

"Got to! Can't help myself! Ef you mought only take one—"

"Will you have it, then?" grated Kearney, lifting his clinched right hand, with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

But before the threatened blow could fall upon that melancholy face, the Grizzly from Ginseng leaped forward and struck the arm down with a single sweep of his hand, then caught the astonished sport about the middle, twisting him from the floor and heaving him up until his weight was supported by those massive shoulders. The same giant grip inclosed both his arms, rendering the athlete helpless as an infant for the time being.

All this passed with such rapidity that few of those present had time to fairly realize trouble was coming.

One of those exceptions appeared to be Allen Bryson, judging from his actions, for scarcely had Ross Kearney stepped upon the threshold, and even while he was uttering those first smooth words, the young man shrunk back, crouching a little, one hand swiftly passing to his hip where nestled a small but efficient revolver.

No one present noticed his movements. If they had, they would have felt assured that these two men were not now meeting for the first time; that they were enemies, even unto the death.

And yet—Ross Kearney did not even seem to recognize the other, though his eyes swept keenly over all present, even while politely picking up the gantlet flung down so boldly by Gabe Gunn.

"Shell I, boss?" gratingly cried the mountaineer, flashing a look toward Solemn Saul, his mighty muscles quivering as though eager to hurl his victim headlong to the floor, there to meet death or insensibility from the shock. "Shell I mash the p'izen critter?"

There was no immediate response on the part of his master. Saul Sunday returned the photograph to his breast pocket, the while cocking his head on one shoulder, smiling blandly as he watched the fruitless efforts of the athletic gambler for freedom. And when he did speak, it was a curious choice of words he made:

"Kin you shove him up at arms' len'th, Gabriel?"

Without a seeming effort the feat was accomplished, and Solemn Saul nodded his head approvingly as he chuckled:

"Jest as e-a-s-y! An' never a shake nur a trim'le! Who says he ain't a seraph, right from—Gabriel?"

"Boss!"

"You kin let the gentleman feel his feet, ef he wants."

"Let me jest mash him once, boss?"

There was a touch of eager pleading in those husky tones, but Solemn Saul shook his head coldly as he declined to grant the prayer.

"Let him feel his feet, Gabriel, but mebbe you'd better coax his hands to keep full o' emptiness while I argue with him a bit on the vanity o' kickin' up a row when nobody else is hankerin' arter it."

Though his strong face wore a look of regret, the Grizzly from Ginseng obeyed his master, lowering the sport to the floor, deftly changing his grip to each wrist, standing behind Kearney and turning his face toward the man of the shells.

One desperate effort Ross made to complete his freedom, but as he felt the bones of his wrists almost splintering in that mighty grip, he forced a quiet which his glittering eyes flatly belied.

Solemn Saul, grave as a deacon despite the malicious laugh which sparkled in his little gray eyes, addressed the captive smoothly:

"Didn't look fer sech a toss-up, did ye, stranger? Thought it was the easiest way fer to knock a pore, limpsy critter like me out o' the road, jest fer axin' of ye a question which—I've got to do it, an' I don't reckon I'll ever ag'in ketch you in sech a mild an' harmless mood, stranger!" fishing the photograph from his bosom and holding it before those angry eyes. "Seraphina Angelina Lovejoy by name. Seraph fer short. Angel by them that's happy 'nough fer to come inside o' the inner circle, ye know, with the other sperrets an' sech-like. They ain't no sech person, I'm beginnin' to b'lieve, but all the same I'm under a crushin' oath to ax every stranger I run up ag'inst ef he or she or they ever knowed or 'lowed to know the lady. You're one. I ax you all that. Ef you'll only be so kind as to answer, pardner?"

Helpless, wholly unable to resent insult or persistence under the present circumstances, Ross Kearney barely glanced at the sun-picture, then cast his eyes swiftly around the room. They rested for a single instant on the face of Allen Bryson, then passed on without sign to betray recognition. But that brief glance led to important results.

It recalled his mission thither, and how much depended on his own conduct. A hot flush came into his face, not of shame or rage at the humiliation he was undergoing, as those who noted it believed, but born of a wonder how Sultana Sate would receive word of his folly.

It was the memory of her, the one woman in all the world whom he cared for, that softened his tones and led to his seeming repentance.

"I never saw the original, sir," his tones cold but equitable. "I should have said as much when you first addressed me, but I let my temper get the best of my good sense. When my hands are at liberty, and I can speak as a free man, I will say more."

"Take off the grip, Gabriel," smiled Solemn Saul, gently.

He was instantly obeyed, but the Grizzly stood in readiness to act promptly when occasion arrived, as he, in common with nearly every man present, believed it would almost instantly. But Ross Kearney had his emotions well under control now, and simply added:

"An apology from bonds is hardly satisfactory to either giver or recipient, but now—I beg your pardon for having treated you so rudely but a few moments ago."

"Sufferin' grandpap!" laughed Solemn Saul, with a rueful wag of his head as he gripped the gambler's hand warmly. "I'm used to heap wuss then that by parties what can't 'preciate the facts o' the case. They hes bin times when—but mebbe you'd rather not, an' I don't blame ye one mite, nuther! Tain't the most cheerin' sort o' talk, an' I'm gittin' pesky tired of it my own self. An' so—Gabriel."

"Waitin', boss!"

"You're a honey, ef I do say it myself! An'

ef you keep on as you've begun, reckon I'll hev to lift your wages with a ten-foot pole."

Ross Kearney turned with a faint smile toward the muscular mountaineer, slowly nodding approval as he glanced over that magnificent torso before saying:

"I didn't think the man lived who could handle me like that, even with a surprise to aid him, stranger. You're a good man; a mighty good man, I'm open to confess; and yet—I reckon I'll stick by what I was on the point of saying when the house fell down and squelched me."

"Which is what?" slowly, harshly uttered the mountaineer, speaking as though he found it no easy task to form the syllables.

"That there never yet was a man so good but what a better could be found, and, without meaning to offend your self-esteem, dear sir," bowing and softening his words with a bland smile, "I believe I can show a man who can down you in fine shape, giving me the choice of modes."

"Ef you're talkin' fer yourself—ef it's your own horn you're tryin' to toot, stranger!" with a clumsy show of measuring his words by the standard set for him by the polite gambler, "I'm your mutton! An' I'll kiver your wad ef I hev to burgle every pocket in Falcon City to make up the sum, too!"

"E-a-s-y, Gabriel!" murmured his master.

Boss Kearney laughed shortly, shrugging his broad shoulders as he made reply:

"Thanks, but I could only hope to match you at cards or with the hair-trigger. I had quite a different man in my mind's eye, I assure you, but if the offer is in the least distasteful to you, I'll gracefully withdraw it. After all, I'd hate to see so fine a fellow hurt."

There was a sting in this sentence that sent the hot blood into the mountaineer's face, but he managed to mutter:

"That's my boss. He's got the say-so. Ef it rested with me, I'd talk out mighty quick. You couldn't show up your man a minnit too soon."

"Look you, shendlemans, dis vay von leedle bit!" broke in Chris Gundelfinger, speaking with ominous calmness as he leaned both hands on the bar and gravely frowned upon the disputants. "I vhas der easiest man for gedding along you offer see. I takes me down efferydings, and makes me no kicking oud pehindt like a grazzy shack-mule-donkey. I vait me all dose eafen-ing vor you keviet down dose racks, and bold me mein dongue so close like a bockedt dot vhas all oafar buddons."

"Dot vhas all rightd, you say; I vhas some shendlemans meinzelf. I knows me dot, long dime already. Bud led me dalk a leedle more oudt. I vhas somedings uff a goot man meinzelf, when I gids me mein Dutch vake vide oben, and den—look away oudt! I makes plood all dot moon oafar!"

"Youst von vord more, shendlemans, uff you please. Dose roompus vhas please sdbod rightd away now off kevic, or I schell me meinzelf oud loose, und vhip dose crowdt all in a heab! Dot vhas me. Dot vhas mein biccolo. Dot vhas all, shendlemans. I speaks me no more. Uff you liden und heedt, all rightd. Off nod, you vhas no shendlemans unnyhow, und I breezed me to glean dot whole gang oudt!"

There was no interruption to this deliberate speech. The majority of those present knew that when Chris Gundelfinger "reared right back on his dignity," there was danger in the air, and knowing this, many of their members glanced furtively toward the door as if to make sure an unobstructed exit was handy in case of need.

Even Ross Kearney seemed impressed by the grave warning, though he wore a genial smile on his handsome face as he uttered:

"I apologize for my share in the disturbance, Christopher, but I'm sorry your mind leans so decidedly toward peace, just at this moment."

"Dot vhas all rightd, Kearney. You vhas a goot mans, but you don't got some lizenze vor rooming mein blace py your own vay. I makes me beace uff I vighdts vor eem!"

"And I don't blame you for feeling that way, but all the same I'm betting a cool century that you can lay this mountain grizzly on the broad of his back, catch-as-catch-can, right now and here! For the credit of Falcon, Chris, and the glory of der Vaterland!" as he flirled out a crisp bill, and—apparently—thrust it into the hand of the first man he met as he pressed forward.

That hand belonged to Allen Bryson!

"I'd rather break *your* neck, critter!" growled Grizzly, with a wicked glance into that handsome face. "But ef the boss says so, I'll upset that man-mountain, or break him in two tryin'!"

"Vhas dot so?" spluttered Gundelfinger, flushing botly as he made his way out of the bar, tearing off his white apron as he came. "You vhas preak me vide oben, eh? You—vell, I vhas hef to laugh uff dot vhasn't so awvuf foony! Preak me vide—vell, vell! how does peer vouldt vly all oafar efferydings ven I goes me vide oben pust!"

"Put up, or hide your heads while we do the crowing, gentlemen!" cried Kearney, laughing lightly as he patted his corpulent champion on

the shoulder. "Be better for a little fattening, maybe, but it's the best in the shop, and it's against our rule to let a customer go away without selling him! Money talks, and ours is just begging for a coverlet off the same quality goods. Swim or paddle for shore, gentlemen!"

"I reckon you'll hev to do it, Gabriel, but down him gently!"

CHAPTER XI.

ALL FOR LOVE.

CALE DIPSON had made a movement as though to follow or bear Ross Kearney company, but this was checked as Sultana Sate uttered those clear, sweet notes. He hardly knew whether he hated or feared them most of late, but he dared not openly disregard her wishes, so soon after the humiliating lesson read him by this dashing mistress.

Sultana Sate turned toward Ben Brown, beckoning him nearer with:

"Let me look at that key a bit, Benjamin, please. And you, Caleb, a word in your private ear."

Brown handed her the key which unlocked the door beyond which the maiden against whose love and lover they were plotting so deliberately, lay a prisoner. Sultana Sate accepted it, then slipped a hand through the arm of the other ruffian, speaking rapidly in lowered tones while leading him toward the closed door.

Ben Brown never glanced in that direction, but other eyes noted the course they were taking.

Eyes that had been shifting from face to face, from figure to figure with painful interest almost from the instant when Sultana Sate relocked the door after her precautionary look at Essie Brown.

And as the two, woman and man, moved as though about to make use of that same key again, the owner of those eyes turned and hastily crept away through the gloom to the rude pallet, stretching her lithe, graceful figure at length, one hand flung in seeming carelessness above her head, a tress of brown hair dropped deftly across her temples, serving as a partial cover to her closing eyes.

And thus Essie Brown lay, apparently in the soundest, dream-free slumber, when Sultana Sate softly opened the door and stole inside, to pause and listen warily as once before.

"Sleeping like a babe in arms, the little darling!" Sultana Sate guardedly uttered, yet with a touch of amused contempt in her tones. "Have you a match handy, Caleb? If so—you need a bit of a bracer, I'm thinking, and what could be better than a sly peep at the dainty morsel which—careful, booby!"

In his flushed eagerness Cale Dipson struck his heel sharply against the edge of a warped board, but Essie gave no sign of arousing. There was far too much at stake for even this shameful intrusion to throw her off her guard.

Through her closed lids she could detect the lighting of a match, and knew that her two most hated enemies were gazing upon her as she lay on the couch, seemingly lost in sleep. And she caught the guarded murmur from Sultana Sate's lips:

"Ready dressed, as you see! One would almost think the little fool suspected something of the truth, and stood ready to make a dash the first chance that offered. Now—no more, Caleb! If she was to awake and find *your* eyes gloating over her, your cake would be worse dough than it is now!"

It was a bit of perfect acting, but then, as Sadia Galway said there was so much at stake! Not a move, save in breathing softly, regularly. Not a quiver of an eyelid, even.

She heard the twain turn and tiptoe from the room, closing the door behind them. She held her breath and listened with all her power of concentration, and the blood seemed to leap in a flood to her brain as she heard the key withdrawn—*could it be?*

Urged by that wild hope Essie Brown sprung from her couch and noiselessly stole to the door, bending until—it was true! Sultana Sate had withdrawn the key without shooting the bolt!

It was well that the latch had caught, for in the brief dizziness which assailed her, blinding her eyes and causing her brain to whirl, Essie was forced to support herself against the door. And while thus fighting for recovery, she heard Sultana Sate add:

"Enough for a dozen, and all yours, Caleb, just for curbing your mad jealousy a few hours longer. Then—when we have stripped our golden angel clean—you can console Mrs. Allen Bryson to your heart's content! That, or lose everything, young life into the bargain! Take your choice, Caleb; which shall it be?"

"Your way, of course, Sultana," came the low response.

"Good enough, and my way it shall be! Now you may escort me to my own palace, Caleb, if you will. My business here is complete, I fancy!"

Without trying the door to make sure its fastening was complete, the unsexed woman crossed the room, tossing the key to Ben Brown with the words:

"Let our little decoy duck have her sleep out, Benjamin. Her acting will be all the more effective if she suspects nothing until the pigeon comes fluttering into the nets."

"She'll learn naught from my lips, be sure."

With her eye close to a little crack in the board partition between the two rooms, Essie Brown saw all this, just as she had watched and listened with a terrible interest ever since Sultana Sate first brought up the subject of their dastardly plot; before her first visit to the seemingly unconscious "decoy duck," in fact.

She saw her father catch the key, and felt her heart give a wild leap of renewed hope as he slipped it into his pocket at once. Surely he could not suspect that Sultana Sate had been so careless!

She saw the woman who was the head and front of this diabolical plot, light a cigar and leave the room, in company with Caleb Dipson.

She saw Ben Brown prop the chair against the disabled door, then breathlessly watched his further movements, her heart actually seeming to still its pulsations as his weird face turned toward the door of her dark prison.

"Check him, kind heaven!" she seemed to pray in her soul. "Blind him—dull his suspicions for—I thank thee!"

For Ben Brown dropped into a chair at the rude table, drawing a flat bottle of liquor from his pocket, drinking long and thirstily, then propping his elbows on the table and hiding his face in his hands.

If the strong water would only overcome him! If he would yield to drowsiness, no matter if but for a few moments!

"Here—searching for me!" inwardly murmured the heart-racked girl, bravely forcing back the hot tears which threatened to blind her eager watching. "I feared—I hoped he had forgotten me long ago! I hoped—guard him, Heavenly Father! Spare me this last, worst stroke! If he dies, his blood will be upon my head!"

The tears would come, and choking sobs shook her frame until she feared the warped partition would betray her to that man who—

"And he is my father!"

Some remembrance attached to that title seemed to renew her strength, and Essie bravely fought back her emotions, dashing the hot dew from her aching eyes and again seeking the narrow crevice through which she had seen and heard so much that night.

To start and gasp for joy as she saw the head of her father sink forward until it rested upon his doubled arms, face downward!

Breathlessly she watched, fearing to hope even yet. With each passing minute she expected to see the shaggy head lift again, conquering drowsiness and liquor both. And with each minute that passed, her prayers that this might not come to pass grew more and more fervent.

If she could only escape from that house!

After that, she could only see the face and figure of the man whom she loved a thousand-fold better than her own life. Beyond that, only the fact that his life was in deadly peril; that he must surely perish unless she could warn him in time for flight.

Ben Brown did not lift his head. He lay like one thoroughly worn out by loss of sleep, or one wholly stupefied by strong drink. And as the minutes crept along, his breathing grew louder, more reassuring to that trembling, praying maiden in the darkened room.

With one hand pressed tightly over her madly-throbbing heart, Essie Brown rose to her feet, pausing only long enough to chase back the dizzy blur that flashed over her aching eyes. Even that delay was positive torture, now that the opportunity for which she had prayed seemed offered her; but she was wise enough to realize the danger of a single false step just then.

She reached the door, slowly, silently turning the knob, swinging it ajar an inch or two, then pausing to gently ease back the catch. She meant to leave the door ajar behind her, for once without that terrible house, it mattered little how soon her flight was discovered.

She saw that her father had not altered his position, and as his heavy, regular breathing came to her ears, she stepped softly into the same room, then passed swiftly to the front door. She removed the chair and opened the disabled door, passing outside and smothering a cry of almost delirious thankfulness as she fled swiftly through the night.

Not until far away from that dingy building did she slacken her pace, to ask herself whither next?

"What did they say? What place was it they mentioned? Where was it that villain spoke of seeing him? Where, oh, where?"

The poor girl paused, clasping her hands over her aching temples as she vainly strove to recall the name of the place where Cale Dipson had seen Allen Bryson. She was free to seek him—but where? How could she find him in time? And his peril was increasing with each minute thus wasted!

"Did they say when? Did that beautiful fiend say—merciful Father!" with a groan of bitter despair as her head bowed lower. "I cannot remember—I cannot think—I'm losing my mind!"

With a choking cry the tortured maiden hurried on through the night, unwitting whither she went, only conscious that a life far more precious than her own hung in the balance.

She never knew how far she wandered while that horrible shadow enveloped her throbbing brain, nor how long that mental blank had lasted. Her recovery was as sudden as had been that frightful obscuration.

She was still in town, still in a portion of it but dimly lighted and thinly sprinkled with buildings. She gazed about her, trying to recognize her surroundings, though she knew but little of Falcon City, thanks to the jealous seclusion in which she had been kept by her father since their arrival. And before she could fairly place herself, Essie started in vague fright at those skulking figures only a few rods away.

Something warned her of bitter peril, and she turned to seek safer quarters at once. She tried to laugh at her fears, but they returned in double force when, after a few moments, she stole a timid glance over her shoulder as she hurried along the rough street.

The same shadows were following her, closer than before!

She turned the first corner, almost running in her growing fright, hoping against hope that her fears would be proven groundless by the shadows maintaining a direct course along the street just deserted by herself. But as she glanced back once more, to see them still upon her track, she knew that her instincts had not deceived her. She was being shadowed—for what? By whom? Her father? The evil tools of that yet more evil woman?

Still she had no fears for herself. She could only think of Allen Bryson and how surely he would be doomed unless she could reach and warn him to flee from the cruel snare even then drawing about his unsuspecting feet. And it was this thought alone that caused her to dart forward at the top of her speed, seeking some place of concealment until those shadows should drift off the scent for good and all.

Even as she took to actual flight, those shadows quickened their pace, and she could hear their rapid footfalls echoing on the night, each one sounding closer and closer until—with a gasping sob of speechless prayer she left the street and sought concealment amidst a clump of stunted bushes at the edge of a vacant lot.

Only to have a hot breath fan her cheek—a strong hand close on her arm. And as that hand's owner drew her back giving a coarse laugh as he did so, she forgot all else in her womanly fears, and raised her voice in a wild, prolonged scream for help!

CHAPTER XII.

SOLEMN SAUL BANISHES DULL CARE.

"Yes, I really reckon we got to face the music, Gabriel," added the man of the shells, his rueful tones in marked contrast with the laugh that lurked in his little gray eyes. "Tain't the money so much I'm hungry fer, but jest think o' the terrible 'struction it'll make in this pore ole town when that man-mountain takes a tumble all in a heap to oncel! Sufferin' grandpap! a airtquake ain't a patchin'!"

"I dinks I hear me some vindt go off, but dot galls vor more as vindt pefore I lays me down like dot," laughed Gundelinger, all good humor now that he was playing a prominent part in the little comedy.

"And blowing is out of order when good money waits a cover, bear in mind, gentlemen," blandly bowed Ross Kearney. "Yonder gentleman holds my ducats, and doubtless he will as cheerfully serve you."

"I'd rather not—I decline to act in any such capacity," muttered Bryson, who had his reasons for keeping in the background.

"Bless ye, pardner, 'twon't take but a minnit, an' my seraph is dead sure to tumble the big critter," briskly uttered the thimble-rigger as he covered the stake without paying any further attention to the unfeigned reluctance shown by the young man.

Bryson yielded, for he knew he could offer no sufficient reason for declining positively, without risking his secret. If his attention was too closely challenged, Ross Kearney would surely recognize him! So, checking his first impulse to reject the office and hastily leave the place, he drew his hat closer over his brows, and silently waited for the decision.

Both of the champions seemed eager to get together, and now that he had fairly cast off his real or assumed melancholy, Solemn Saul showed quite as much celerity as the athletic sport himself, removing the collar of claws and detaching the hairy holsters from the belt which Grizzly simply drew a notch tight before declaring his readiness for the test of strength and skill.

Ross Kearney was a little more elaborate in his preparations, and took time to drop several hints into the ear of his corpulent champion, all of which were received with smiling good-nature.

"Dot vhas all right, mein herr," he nodded, cheerily. "Maype I vhas oldt und vat, und some hair vanting my headt on dop, bud I vhas me nod creen 'bout dose schnatch-grabble

dricks—nein! I dravel mit a show dot oldt goundry in, when I vhas younger as now, und dose brobrioders hang oop a burse each night vor der man as lay me down my pack on, vonee, while I dumble dem dree dimes foorst! Und—you mark me dot down mid a bieco uff plack shalk, mein vriendt!" with grave impressiveness as he tapped the amused sport on the shoulder. "Dose burses vhas der werry samo when I kevit me dot show, as when I dakes me dot ongemend on! I vhas yousdt like dot vor a hairbins!"

"Three points down, and the first fall takes the pile," briskly called out Kearney as the champions faced each other. "Double the bet that my man gets the decision, and willing to take your own acknowledgment as to the fall."

But the thimble-rigger shook his head in negation as he said:

"I'm too rich now, an' we're only playin' fer fun, pardner! Time!"

Even Allen Bryson began to feel deeply interested in the trial of skill between two such sharply-contrasted characters, and taking the precaution to tuck the stakes into an inner pocket, he watched each movement of the rival champions with all the closeness of a natural athlete himself.

To the outward eye Solemn Saul was lost to all else, but nevertheless he kept one eye upon Ross Kearney as though far from convinced that he had forgiven his unceremonious treatment by the man against whom he was now risking his money. And wholly absorbed as he seemed in his own champion, the thimble-rigger held himself in readiness to meet and foil any trickery on the gambler's side.

Slow, clumsy, elephantine though he usually seemed while behind his bar, now that he was stripped and warmed to the fray, Chris Gundelfinger astonished even those who knew him best by his marvelous activity, for several minutes shrewdly foiling the swift attempts of the mountaineer to secure an advantageous grip. And then, to their still greater surprise, the human behemoth actually assumed the offensive, catching Gabe Gunn in his huge arms, tripping him up and hurling him toward the floor much as a grown man might upset a little child.

But the Grizzly from Ginseng turned in the air, to strike on his hands and feet, then, with marvelous celerity he avoided the rush of the German, flinging one arm about his great neck, and turning with his right side against Gundelfinger's back, bending over and throwing all his muscular powers into the struggle for a "cross-buttock!"

Either neck must snap or feet must go up! The latter yielded first, and Chris Gundelfinger turned over in the air, to fall with a tremendous crash and clatter behind the bar!

"All down but one, an' that's the Grizzly from Ginseng!" shouted Gabe Gunn, whirling swiftly to confront Ross Kearney, uttering his wild roar with unimpaired lungs. "Pick up your man-mountain, critter, an' tell him you're heap sorry fer bein' sech a durned fool as to think ye knowed it all when ye ain't—"

"Gabriel!" warningly cried his master, lifting a bony finger.

"Ready, boss!" was the prompt response, though with an undercurrent of sullen regret that Ross Kearney could hardly have missed recognizing, had he not just then hastened over to care for the grunting, spluttering German who was tightly wedged in behind his own bar, neck and heels.

"Shake, you 'tarnal critter!" chuckled Sunday, no longer Solemn Saul, in outward semblance at least, gripping his seraph by the hand and ecstatically rattling his heels in tune upon the sand floor. "You're a honey, Gabriel! You're a—durned ef you ain't the hull list, forward an' back an' up the middle an'—ef I didn't holler I'd bust!"

It was a ridiculous imitation of the Grizzly's roar, but it apparently served his purpose, and then the gaunt thimble-rigger hurried to ascertain how the honest saloon-keeper had fared.

Better than could have been expected, considering the lofty circle his legs had described, and his enormous bulk. A few bruises, a trifling scratch or so from the shattered glassware, but without a broken bone or even a serious strain. And though he was something short of wind for the time being, there was no malice in face or voice as he pushed Ross Kearney aside to reach for the hand of his conqueror.

"Dot v heller galls you a honey, mein herr? Py dunder! you vhas a whole pee-hive like a haysdack so pig! Und me? I veels me yousdt a leedle vile ago dot I vhas a palloon, py der vay I goes me vlying dose air drough! Vell, vell! I neffer dinks me I liff so long! Und I vhas going to schweeb dose vloer all oafar mit you, too!" with a cheery laugh that contained not one particle of malice, resentment or chagrin at the utter defeat he had undergone.

"I'd rather it was anybody else then you, boss," smiled the mountaineer, as their gaze met frankly.

"I dakes me goot gare id vhas neffer me some more, unnyvay!" the fat host declared, honestly. "You make dot sdick your memory in, mein herr. I vhas hog enough to know when I gids me blendy to sbare!"

"Ain't they two leetle cherubims, both,

gents!" cried Saul Sunday, his head cocked on one shoulder, his bony hands uplifted in ecstatic admiration. "Huggin' each other 'erost the bloody chasin an'— Be durned ef it isn't time fer irrigatin' all han's round! Whar's my staff? Whar's the little— *Wall, now, I, jest, won't!*" flinging his battered tile to the floor, and lifting it to the ceiling on the toe of a gaiter the next instant.

"Durn the sperrets an' double durn the vow! Fer once in my life I'm goin' fer to call back the days o' San Saba, an' make b'lieve I'm a free an' 'pendent citizen o' all these United States forever amen!"

He caught up the polished staff from where he had deposited it at the end of the bar, banding it to Gundelfinger, as that worthy passed back to his position of duty, saying recklessly:

"Take it, pardner! Stow it away, an' don't let me hev it afore the rosy dawn comes to look ef I'm dead drunk or dirty sober! I'm a man fer to-night, ef it takes a hind leg off! Whooray fer— An' that reminds me—whar is the gent that begged me to wring his pocket dry?"

The Grizzly from Ginseng uttered a short, harsh laugh as he caught the last sentence, and curtly announced:

"I reckon he 'membered a pressin' 'gagement he hed in some other place, boss. Anyway, he went out o' that door, yender, like he'd bin sent fer in a hurry an' was mighty glad to go!"

"Better luck go with him!" grinned the thimble-rigger, after a moment's blank stare. "Ef he ain't so favored, he'll need a money machine for to keep his pockets— Waal, now, I will be durned!" with an indignant snort and grimace of utter disgust as he looked in vain for the stranger who had been elected as stakeholder.

Allen Bryson had vanished just as rapidly and silently as had Ross Kearney himself!

"Six o' one an' hafe dozen o' t'other!" grimly chuckled the Grizzly from Ginseng, shrugging his broad shoulders. "They've gone off to whack up, I reckon, boss!"

"You see him go, Gabriel?" reproachfully uttered his master. "An' you didn't even try to grup a coat-tail! Is that the way you play seraph, Gabriel?"

The mountaineer shrugged his shoulders indifferently, saying:

"Ef you can't keep the money I winned, is it my fault, boss?"

"An' I never see eyther critter afore! A clean steal, an'—"

Gundelfinger earnestly protested against such a charge being brought against Ross Kearney, for whom he stood ready to go bail in any reasonable amount. As for the other, he could not say. He was unknown to him, and simply a transient customer, having never been inside the Headlight before that very evening.

Solemn Saul quickly rallied, laughing with the company at his loss through over-confidence in human nature.

"Easy come an' easy go! I'll make it up on the next smart aleck who knows more than the law allows!" he cheerfully cried, flinging another bank-note upon the counter as he added:

"What's the odds, so long's you're happy? An' this is my one clean night fer furdur back then I keer 'bout 'memberin' while the happy streak is holdin' out. Walk up, gents, an' see which critter kin hold his breath the longest! Fer I'm kickin' the sperrits under the table jest now, an' don't keer a wormy shell fer all the oaths an' vows an' cusses an'— Gabriel!"

"Yar I be, boss!" rumbled the big mountaineer.

"Was ye ever drunk, Gabriel?"

"Waal, not to say so beastly full but what I could cram down more dram, boss!" gravely responded the seraph.

"An' when you was the drunkest, was it wu't in your head or in your heels? Could you navigate, Gabriel?"

"Walk a crack an' never stop to see which was the right one, boss!"

"Then I'm goin' fer to see how much my ole tank kin hold 'thout leaking over the top, Gabriel," gravely added the thimble-rigger, gripping a paw of the Grizzly and shaking it vigorously. "I'm dubious my head an' feet both go weak in a heap, Gabriel. An' ef I was to take a lay-down right whar that weakness over-ketched me, mebbe that pesky welsher might come 'long back fer to 'vestigate my financial condish, don't ye see? An' so—Gabriel!"

"I'm listenin' to ye, boss."

"When you see my tank begin to show signs o' too much plenty, tote me to a hashery an' tuck me up tenderly. Now—wake up snakes an' go 'way trouble! I'm a rip-roarer right from—whisky straight, an' some dry gentleman please drink my sheer o' water, won't ye?"

And from that moment Saul Sunday was the gayest of the gay, his tongue rattling as if fastened in the middle. And he might have fully carried out his pledge if the shrill shriek of a woman had not startled them just as the fun waxed highest.

CHAPTER XIII.

FOLLOWING THE LURE.

ALLEN BRYSON had hardly enjoyed that match between giants as thoroughly as he

might have done under different circumstances, lover of athletics though he undeniably was. At least one-half of his attention was claimed by the blonde sport from the outset, and this interest grew deeper shortly after the two champions took up their positions on guard, facing each other.

The instant Ross Kearney crossed the threshold, Allen felt confident he had seen him before. A second glance convinced him of this, and recalled the company in which that meeting had taken place.

Lest Kearney likewise have his memory freshened, Bryson strove to keep in the background as much as possible, until he could quietly make his escape from the Headlight. Not to run away on his own account, for he was nothing of a coward, but to wait and watch and record the movements of this athletic rascal.

For rascal Bryson felt Kearney must be, though he really knew but little concerning his character or methods of gaining a livelihood. A rascal, or he would never have been found associated with Ben Brown!

It was hardly probable that Ross Kearney could have foreseen all that actually transpired in the Headlight, or that he acted other than on the impulse of the moment, stirred to pick up the bold challenge flung out by the Grizzly from Ginseng by his long training as a professional sport who finds matter for betting in all things and at all times. But if so, the blonde gambler played his part to perfection, and on his guard though he considered himself, Allen Bryson never for an instant suspected the truth: that he was being surely led into a cunning trap, by a still more cunning artist.

Not until the champions were facing each other, sparring for a lock, did Ross Kearney play his second card, which was to start and change countenance briefly as his gaze fairly met that of the stakeholder. It was really an artistic performance, and even Bryson doubted whether his lively fancy had not deceived him for a few moments; but even while his champion was hurling the Grizzly from Ginseng through the air to the floor, Kearney stole another anxious look into that comely face, and Bryson no longer doubted that he was recognized, in whole or in part.

The bare thought set his brain in a whirl. In this man he fancied he saw a clew to the mystery which so darkly enveloped the one woman whom he loved. Through him he had hoped to find her place of refuge or confinement. Now— "Shall I pin the rascal and force the whole truth from his lips?"

It was a wild, foolish thought, but for a single breath Allen Bryson seemed about to act upon it, regardless of what might befall himself. But just at that juncture the Grizzly from Ginseng caught his antagonist in that famous lock, defeating him almost before the struggle was fairly begun. And in the wild excitement which followed, the impatient lover found himself cut off from his enemy, and was given time in which to realize the worse than folly of his impulse.

He caught another swift, anxious glance from Kearney, confirming his belief that if not actually recognized and recalled, his face was puzzling and giving the blonde gambler serious uneasiness. And forcing himself to bide his time, resolved to never lose sight of this clew until he had followed it to the joyful end, Bryson forgot everything else.

And so it chanced that he became what Solemn Saul indignantly denounced as a "welsher," using the language of the race-course in his natural chagrin at being so openly duped.

He saw Ross Kearney flash a covert glance toward him just before slipping out of the saloon under cover of the hilarity which greeted the reconciliation of the champions, and without giving a thought to his own peril, in case his espial should be detected, Bryson followed hard after the athletic gambler, giving a quick breath of relief as he caught sight of that shapely figure striding rapidly down the broadening pathway of light cast forth by the polished reflector.

"Now I have got you, Mister Man!" the trailer uttered, in an undertone, as he sprang swiftly across the strip of light into the shadows beyond, turning to follow the gambler. "Shake me off if you can!"

But Ross Kearney seemed satisfied with having stolen out of the Headlight without being halted or hailed, and never once looked behind him after the fashion of one who fears that he may be spied upon.

It was the one weak point in his acting, but Allen Bryson was too deeply interested to note this at its true value. After all, the fellow might not have recognized him. They had met but once or twice, and never with a fair chance for studying each other's peculiarities. And few men were gifted with his memory of faces.

"But if he did, what matter?" mused Bryson, as he kept closely on the track of his game, resolved to stick until the end, no matter what the peril might be. "Is it likely he knows? Brown would not tell, and Essie—"

Even in thought he would not couple those twain.

After all, he knew very little concerning this man whom he was shadowing through the night. He only knew that he had the reputation of being a daring and successful "sport," with all that term implies. He knew he that was acquainted with the father of the girl who was dearer than all the world else to his heart. He believed he was allied with the evil gang to which, late in the days of his sweet love-dream, he had learned Ben Brown was bound by powerful ties.

He remembered how that startling news had come to him, and how his proud spirit rebelled for the moment. He recalled how briefly this endured, when that other tidings came to him: the words that seemed to crush his spirit and make his heart weep tears of blood; the knowledge that his loved one had fled forever from his sight and presence!

Fled—and her shy, yet ardent kisses were even then lingering on his lips!

"Father, friend or stranger," he muttered, his teeth clicking viciously together as he crouched low to spring across a dangerously lighted strip, his gaze still riveted upon that tall, graceful figure before him, "I'll kill the one who tore us apart!"

Never for an instant had he believed what that message purported to convey, beyond the simple fact that his loved one had taken flight from the city of their birth, hundreds of miles nearer the rising sun than this wretched evidence of western progress and enterprise. He never would believe that Essie had left him of her own accord, until he heard the words issue from her own red lips.

Ever since that terrible night he had sought for his lost love, spending money free as running water, following every clew, real or fancied, but without even the shadow of success until, unsigned, unsealed, undated or with other clew to betray whence or how it had come, a brief note bade him look for the lost one in Falcon City; bade him wait for the writer night after night in the Headlight Saloon, between the hours of eight or ten.

Only that. But it was sufficient to turn Allen Bryson's face toward the setting sun, without a thought as to his own possible peril.

Little by little Allen Bryson grew certain that Ross Kearney suspected the fact of his pursuit, for in no other way could he explain the doublings and turnings taken by the athletic gambler. Already they covered ground enough to have taken them to and fro from any one point in the not over-large town, but still the gambler maintained his pace, showing no signs of coming to a definite stopping-place. And yet, if he really suspected pursuit, why did he not turn sharply back to confront the spy?

"He's no coward, or common report lies blankly," mused Bryson, assuring himself that his trusty revolver was free for swift handling in case of need. "Can it be that the rascal is trying to trap a fellow after some odd fashion?"

He smiled grimly at the thought, and followed his game all the more closely. Whatever his other faults or failings, it was evident he was no coward.

And yet, but a few seconds later he stopped short and grasped his pistol as the half-smothered cry for help in a woman's voice came to his ears, for it flashed upon him that this was the trap, and that it had been prepared expressly for him by Ross Kearney himself!

His gaze had been so keenly fixed on the tall gambler that he had taken no note of other shadowy figures beyond, but he saw them now, and could just make out that they were engaged in what looked like a struggle for—

"Help! save me, for—"

It certainly was the voice of a woman, and too full of agonized fright for counterfeiting by even the most cunning actress.

"What the dence—hold on there!" cried Ross Kearney, his tones those of hot indignation as he sprang into active motion, recklessly leaping forward, like one who never thought of counting odds, when such a piteous appeal was made to his manhood.

And Allen Bryson also advanced, though with less headlong haste, held in check by that sudden suspicion. But when he saw Ross Kearney close with the phantom like figures, sending one reeling back to fall in a quivering heap, then close with the others, those doubts melted away like magic, and with a cheering shout he dashed to the rescue.

As his sturdy voice rung out, the dark figures separated, two of them flying down the deserted street at breakneck pace, while Ross Kearney only paused to cry out:

"Look after the lady and that rascal, pardner! I'll run down the others, or—"

The conclusion was lost in the echoes of his flying feet as he darted away in fierce pursuit of the two footpads.

Allen Bryson neither heard nor heeded, for he had made a most marvelous discovery that instant.

"Essie—my love!" he hoarsely gasped, staggered for the moment by his own emotions, but rallying quickly as the slender figure turned to seek safety in flight. "Essie—'tis I! Allen—your Allen!"

He said no more, just then, for with a choking cry of intense thankfulness, Essie Brown sunk tremblingly into his eager arms, laughing and sobbing hysterically as his hot lips showered kisses upon her pale face.

For the moment all else was forgotten in that glad reunion. He could think only of his love, found and safely nestling within his arms, never again to elude him through the evil arts of others. She, that her refuge was reached at last, despite all perils and privations.

"Thank Heaven, my angel!" huskily muttered Bryson, clasping her trembling figure still more closely to his broad breast, ceasing his caresses for an instant in order to gaze into the sweet face he loved so passionately. "I have you now! I will never let you leave me more!"

If such was his hope, his words were chosen ill. They served to recall Essie to the present, and with a low, wailing cry she tried to slip from his embrace.

"You must not—I cannot be—"

"You are mine and I am thine, little one," almost harshly interposed Bryson, something of his stern nature showing in his face as in his tones. "Nothing can separate us again. Why were you so cruel? Why did you flee from me, even while your kisses and—"

"No, no!" faintly struggling for liberty, turning her face away as his lips sought hers once more. "It is a sin—a mortal sin! Look!" with a gasping cry as she pointed toward a shadowy figure in the gloom only a short distance away. "They are coming—to kill you, my darling! Flee—for the love of high Heaven, Allen, flee while you may!"

Bryson swiftly freed his right arm, his hand grasping a revolver, but with his left he still securely held Essie by his side. He had found her again. He would never lose her while life lingered in his veins, though he had to fight an army single-handed.

CHAPTER XIV.

UNDER THE STARLIGHT.

THE shadowy shape was that of a man, but instead of coming nearer and growing more distinct, it rapidly melted away into the obscurity.

"You see, little woman," forcing a laugh as his arm drew closer about that round waist. "So vanish all your imaginary bugbears when an honest man and true lover confronts them. Now—"

"He will return—you must flee, Allen!" hurriedly uttered the maiden, glancing fearfully about them, then trying to lead him away from the spot where her pursuers had overtaken her.

"He will come back to see—"

"Whom do you mean by 'he,' little one?" asked Bryson, humoring her so far as to walk away, at right angles to the course he had taken in reaching the scene. "Who were those rascals, and how did you chance to be abroad at this hour?"

"I mean—I do not know who they were," calming her agitation by a desperate effort of will, never before feeling the necessity of a clear and resolute brain as in this emergency. "I meant that awful man—that one who came just before you, and—"

"Ross Kearney, you mean?"

"You know him?" in surprise. "You were with him? Oh, Allen!" and her shivering revived as her little hands clung imploringly to his strong arm. "Beware of that evil wretch! Shun him as you would death itself, for he is plotting you evil—evil worse than death to both you and me!"

"I'll shun him—as long as he keeps out of my track," with a short, hard laugh, though he felt inwardly ashamed of the sharp pang of jealousy which made itself felt as he heard Essie mention the handsome sport, even though it were in terms of fear and loathing. "But you haven't told me—Essie, why did you leave me? Of what horrible crime was I guilty? How did I deserve such cruel treatment?"

The poor girl bent her head, crushed for the moment by a sense of bitter shame and utter despair. She felt her burden almost too great for endurance, yet she must struggle on beneath it until—until the man she loved so hopelessly was saved from his enemies.

"Not now—I dare not—time is too precious for such a long explanation," she forced herself to utter, her tones sounding curiously hard and unnatural to her own ears. "Will you not trust me yet a little longer, Allen?"

"Forever, Essie, so long as you do not ask me to let you go free," was the grave response, his eyes trying to read the whole truth in her pale face, by the dim light of the twinkling stars.

"Would you hold me against my will, Mr. Bryson?"

She sought to make her voice cold and haughty, but with little success. And instead of being awed or abashed, her lover clasped her once again to his breast, kissing her half-averted lips again and again.

"Against your will, Essie?" he murmured, his voice deep, but full to overflowing with ardent love. "Look straight into my eyes, and tell me deliberately that I am holding you captive against your will."

"I do—I must say it!"

"With your lips, but not with your heart, little angel," he laughed softly, encouraged rather than otherwise, for though she forced herself to speak thus, her eyes were unable to meet his ardent gaze and confirm the lie her lips faltered forth so reluctantly. "Until you can stand that test to my satisfaction, Essie, I'll continue to play the tyrant and remain your loving jailer. And now—I am going to take you to my hotel, there to remain under jealous care while I hunt up a clergyman or a justice, to give me legally the rights I have assumed."

"I will not—I dare not!" panted the tortured girl, once more waking to a full realization of her actual condition.

"Essie?" with stern yet sad reproach in his eyes and voice. "You are my promised wife. Why not redeem that pledge now when you so sorely need a strong arm and a stout heart to protect you from your enemies? Is it because you no longer love me? Is it because—You have not met another man to love better, Essie?"

Her tears ceased to flow, her strength was doubled, and with a vigorous effort she stood free from his embrace, erect, her eyes flashing through the gloom like twin stars in miniature.

"I could almost wish it, Allen Bryson, when you speak like that! I could almost repent having dared and suffered so much in trying to warn you against the terrible peril which menaces you this very hour!"

"And yet you try to swear you love me no longer, Essie?" laughing softly, his own eyes all aglow with his measureless passion for this lovely maiden: never more lovely than now, as she faced him so proudly.

Despite the gloom, he could see that soft flush creeping into her pale face, and for the moment he believed he had won the coveted victory. And had the barrier between them been less black and terrible, no doubt his utmost wishes would have been fulfilled.

But Essie shrunk back from his appealing gesture, shaking her head sadly but resolutely as she uttered:

"I must not, I dare not yield further, Allen. There is a barrier between you and me, deeper, darker than the grave!"

"I will fill it up, and strew flowers over the fresh mold, Essie."

"Still it would remain a grave, and—Allen," with an imploring gesture, but still shrinking from his outstretched hands. "Spare me! I am half-crazed now, and you are deepening my torture with every plea you utter! If you ever loved me—"

"It is that very love that makes me persist, Essie! When I thought I had lost you forever, all the light seemed to go out of my life. Now that I have found you again, shall I stand still and see you fade away out of sight, without even one effort to hold you fast?"

At that moment both were startled by a shout proceeding from the quarter in which the poor girl had been overtaken in her blind flight from the three roughts whom the coming of Ross Kearney had put to rout so opportunely. And right or wrong, each fancied it the voice of the blonde gambler, trying to ascertain their whereabouts.

"Come—hurry—you must run!" gasped Essie, catching his arm and urging him away with all her feeble strength. "He means to draw you into a snare where death—oh, if you love me, Allen, haste!"

She hardly realized the words she uttered, but they proved most effectual. Bryson passed an arm about her waist, almost carrying her as he hastened away from that voice, now stilled as though its owner was pausing for a reply. He knew not whither this course was leading him, but he cared as little, only steering as free as possible of betraying lights, preferring solitude to company other than that of his loved one, at least until he had won her over to his views.

For some little time they hurried on under the starlight without pause or stoppage, though that voice was no longer raised, nor aught of danger presented itself, even to the fearful eyes of the frightened maiden, keenly, constantly as she gazed about them through the night.

Presently Allen Bryson came to a halt under a wind-crooked and scanty-topped tree which stood by the side of the path; street it could hardly be called with propriety. He still retained his firm, yet tender embrace, and his other hand sought and secured the hands of his loved one, before he spoke again.

"Now, Essie," and his tones were calm, even grave as they claimed her attention. "Now, Essie, I must ask you to explain just what you meant by speaking of a trap, or a snare being set for me. You can speak without fear of interruption or of being heard by any other ears than mine, little woman. I think we have doubled enough for that."

There was no immediate response, and he felt her figure shiver in his gentle grasp. It was a difficult task to perform, now that she had the chance for which she had prayed so earnestly. How difficult, the poor child had never fully realized until that moment.

But it must be done. He must be warned of

his danger, and so warned as to be driven to hasty flight far beyond the reach of those terrible schemers. And telling herself this, she made an essay:

"I meant what I said, Allen," her voice growing clearer and more steady as she continued. "There is an evil, wicked gang of criminals plotting against your gold—against your life, as well! Do not ask me how I learned so much, but try to believe that I am speaking the plain, simple truth, dear."

He started a little at that familiar term of endearment, but as he knew it dropped unconsciously from her lips, he refrained from taking advantage of her agitation just then.

"I do not ask, because I can readily guess the source of your information, darling," he uttered gravely, but with still plainer love in his face and voice. "I know all about your father and his unfortunate connection with a band of law-breakers. I don't tell you this to hurt you, little angel," his arm drawing her shivering figure still closer, his head bowing to catch a glimpse of her bending, shame-stricken face. "I simply wish to prove how strong is my love for you, and how far above being shocked or weakened by even such knowledge, Essie. I love you for yourself. And if I knew that the hand of the man you call father was steeped to the shoulder in innocent blood, still I would love you—love you as I do now, with a passion which only the grave can chill or render speechless!"

He paused as if expecting a reply to this gravely ardent speech, but there came none. A shadow crept over his face, but he kept it out of his voice as he gently added:

"Essie, I have spoken without disguise, laying bare my inmost heart for your inspection. Will you not be equally candid? Will you not say that my honest love shall be rewarded, even as you gave me the promise only a few short months ago? Have I indeed lost you, just as I believed you were found for good and all time to come? Essie?"

The woman never lived who could wholly resist such an appeal from the lips of the man she loved above all others in life. Essie yielded so far as to lift her head, forcing her eyes to meet his pale, hard-set and anxious face. But when she spoke, her tones were forced and unnatural, even to her own ears.

"You force me to speak, Allen, though you should know that each word I feel obliged to utter cuts me to the very heart?"

"Better present pain than future remorse and unavailing regret, my love," was his grave response. "Am I so selfish, because I think a little of myself? If so, I must bear the imputation, for I know that you loved me then, and I can never believe that your love has changed until I hear you swear it, in plain words."

"Would you believe it then?"

He gazed steadily into her tear-dimmed eyes, trying to sound their utmost depths, and partially succeeding, for he steadily uttered:

"I would not believe you even then, Essie. I would not believe you had changed from love to hate or indifference, so long as I can see what I see in those dear eyes, my darling!"

He bent forward and dropped a soft, light kiss upon each white lid, then drew back in grave silence. Essie made no attempt to elude his simple caresses, though she caught her breath sharply. There was far more of pain than pleasure for her in those lip-touches, knowing what she knew, feeling what she must ever feel.

"Allen," she said, speaking very slowly, for she found it hard to school her voice, even yet. "Allen Bryson, I will not lie to you in this our final meeting on earth. You ask me if my love for you has changed to dislike or indifference? I reply—"

With a start she broke short off, bending forward with a frightened stare over his shoulder, her face turning corpse-like in its pallor as she distinguished a phantom-like figure in the very act of leaping upon her unsuspecting lover, deadly weapon in uplifted hand!

"Allen! Danger! turn quickly and—spare him—have mercy!"

But with a fierce, snarling cry the assassin made his leap.

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE GRIP OF THE GRIZZLY.

INSTANT silence fell over all in the Headlight as that shrill, anguish-laden sound came floating through the night, almost instantly followed by the spiteful explosion of gun or pistol.

"Sufferin' grandpapi!" ejaculated Solemn Saul, dropping the brimming glass with which he was in the act of proposing a toast, one hand instinctively pressing his breast where rested the faded photograph. "It's my Seraphina Angelica! Don't I know her sweet bazoo? An'—ef it ain't I want to know the reason why!"

The words came so rapidly as to almost choke him, but before the last one was fairly clear of his lips, he was going out through the open door, flinging back the indignant words:

"Git a move onto ye, critters! Ain't ye goin' fer to—waal, ef I was sech tormented ornary—won't stir a peg to help a woman in distress?"

Only his own intense excitement, aided and abetted no doubt by the strong waters which he

had already swallowed, could excuse such words, for close upon his heels came nearly every one of the little company, ready and eager to respond in practical fashion to that wild appeal for help.

Foremost among them was the Grizzly from Ginseng, one of his restored revolvers ready drawn in his hand, while others gripped weapons as only men do who know well their use and are anxious to improve that accomplishment.

Out of the brightly-lighted saloon, under the stars, but then came a balk. From whence that wild shriek? To which hand must they turn?

Even Saul Sunday appeared to be at a loss, as no guiding sound came to their ears. All was still in that immediate vicinity, and it seemed as though no ears save their own had caught that ugly alarm.

"Split an' scatter, boys!" the gaunt thimble-rigger cried, after a single breath of indecision. "Yelp out ef anybody hits 'er off fust!"

He set the example himself by dashing around the nearest corner, one keen sweep of his eyes assuring him that nothing lay in the broad path of light beginning at the Headlight.

It was doubtless the wisest course that could have been taken, for if that alarm was in deadly earnest, there was no time to waste in speculations, wise or otherwise.

A number of the men instinctively obeyed, scattering each as his first impulse led him, but Gabe Gunn kept close behind the man who had won his services for a year and a day, either because of that fact, or through a belief that the course was the most likely to lead to good.

Once around the corner and out of the silvery zone, all looked dark and lonely, fit stage for evil deeds or shameful outrage. The few buildings were unlighted, the neglected streets were deserted, early though the hour still was. And even Solemn Saul seemed cast into doubt once more, for he slackened his headlong pace, to be almost hurled from his footing as Gabe Gunn ran against him in the gloom.

"Easy, Gabriel!" he spluttered, brushing a hand across his eyes as if to wipe the puzzling reflection from them. "They ain't—be darned ef they isn't, though!" with a total change of tone, as his keen eyes settled upon a significant sight only a few rods in advance.

He darted forward, to pause the next moment by a prostrate figure lying near a straggly-topped tree. The figure of a man, lying face downward in the sandy road, still and motionless, with arms and legs awkwardly disposed; a position such as no man ever wittingly assumed.

"Bloody murder, or— Whoop-ee!" ending in a shrill, far-reaching shout, as a signal for the citizens to rally.

Not until that duty was performed did Solemn Saul stoop to examine the prostrate figure, and when he did this, not only Gabe Gunn but several others were close at hand and eye-witnesses to his movements.

Even as he touched the shape, the gaunt thimble-rigger noticed the blood-dampened hair that stuck to his hands as he lifted the head over to catch a glimpse of the features. Only a single glimpse, then he dropped the head to utter in strained tones:

"Dead fer rocks! Bored right through the—Mournful Moses! Thar they go! Head 'em off, somebody! Hold on, ye p'izen 'sassinators, fer the little joker's comin'—red-hot an' still a-heatin'!"

He leaped to his feet with long arm outstretched and wildly gesticulating, then dashed away in that direction like a bloodhound on a fresh scent, excitedly adding, as he plunged into the shadows:

"Hurry up, boys; we'll ketch 'em up yit! Thar they go!"

After him dashed the no less excited citizens, forgetting the body lying in the blood-marked sand, thinking only of capturing the authors of that outrage.

But one man lingered, crouching beside the unfortunate, one heavy hand resting upon its breast, two eyes glowing down into that bloody face. For now the body lay upon its back, turned by the strong hands of the man who seemed lost to all else; who paid no heed to the rapidly retreating avengers; who seemed under a spell as he stared at that strongly-marked countenance.

If it was a spell, it lasted only a few seconds. The citizens, following Solemn Saul's lead, had hardly faded out of sight amid the shadows when Gabriel Gunn caught that dead or senseless body up in his arms, swinging it across his broad shoulders, then sped away through the night, taking a course almost at right-angles with that in which the chase had headed.

Far beyond the common run of mankind in muscular powers though he was, as his feats that night had plainly proven, it was well for Gabe Gunn that the town extended but a short distance in the direction he had taken, intentionally or by instinct. The weight of any man is a back-breaking load at best, and doubly awkward when, as now, that man be dead or senseless, his limbs dangling inertly.

The Grizzly from Ginseng ran fully a couple of hundred yards with his hastily pack, then

even he was forced to pause for breath and a renewed hold. He dropped the body to the ground without much care for its integrity, crouching beside it, panting quickly as he gazed keenly around, one hand hovering close to those silent lips in readiness to fall and smother any attempted outcry in case of need.

There seemed no cause for alarm, so far as his alert senses could make out. Either the avengers under Saul Sunday were again at fault, or were running silent-tongued with their game in view.

He was fairly clear of the town, to all intents and purposes, although an occasional lot was occupied by a shanty, on either hand and even to the rear of his present position. But neither of these showed a light or gave other signs of human life, and the Grizzly from Ginseng only glanced at them in passing.

"Better for you if they don't come, old fellow!" came gratingly through his bearded lips, his glowing eyes resting briefly on the face of the man who had so curiously fallen into his power. "You're hardly worth fighting for, as a man, but as a thing to be pumped—well, when I get through with you, they're welcome to the empty shell!"

A low, hard, ugly laugh followed those muttered words, and Gabriel Gunn deftly swung the still lifeless body upon his shoulders, rising beneath the dead, sluggish weight, and striding off at a more leisurely pace, heading for the rough, dark, forbidding hills whose rugged outline blotted out the stars of the northern horizon.

Although clear of the town and almost insured against the pursuit or other interference by either the friends or the foemen of his captive, Grizzly Gabe lost no unnecessary time in adding to the distance which separated him from Falcon City. Twice he paused to rest, and twice he resumed his dogged retreat before his prize gave signs of life. Nor did he pause then, simply tightening his grip and breasting the slope like a true-bred mountaineer, seemingly bent on losing himself amid the stunted bushes and the thick-lying rocks.

Not until his prize began an actual struggle for freedom, uttering a faint, choking cry of mingled rage and vicious hatred, did the giant come to a halt and drop his burden to the ground.

If he had not gained the precise retreat for which he had been aiming all the time, it could hardly have been bettered, so far as seclusion was concerned.

All around were the gray, weather-beaten rocks, looking weird and ghost-like in the starlight. Between the rocks grew bushes and creepers and brambles, shutting the two men in from sight, even were the sun riding high in the heavens to light up the desolate scene.

"I'll—she's mine!" gasped the captive, brokenly, lifting his head in a feeble, bewildered attempt to gain his feet. "Curse you! I'll kill—"

"Or be killed, Caleb Dipson!"

Slow, distinct, grim and pitiless came the substitute, as Gabriel Gunn pressed a muscular hand upon his breast and forced his captive back once more.

"You're not—who are you?" gasped the wounded wretch, his bloodshot eyes dilating with stupid amazement, one hand mechanically rising to his bullet-scored skull.

"Your master, just now, Caleb Dipson," was the grim retort as Gabe Gunn rapidly ran his hands over the person of his prize, relieving him of a revolver and an ugly looking bowie-knife, both of which he cast carelessly into the bushes behind them. "And the master of your future so far as this world is concerned. After—well, I may be a devil, but I'm not trying to cheat Satan out of his just dues!"

Cale Dipson cowered under that steady gaze, but he said no more just then. He was trying to clear away the mists which enshrouded his brain, trying to divine how he came in this strange place, helpless in the power of a stranger, when the last he could recall was—

"Where is she, curse you?" he panted, his face flushing and his eyes gaining fresh fire. "She's mine—she's all mine, and—"

His rising tones were smothered by a broad palm, and bending over him until their faces almost met, the Grizzly from Ginseng uttered:

"You lie in your throat, Caleb Dipson! You're mine—all mine! And being mine, I'll slit your throat like a rotten apple if you dare to yelp out after that fashion again. I've warned you fair; now take your choice, Caleb!" drawing back and removing his hand, only to fill it with the wickedly glittering blade drawn from its bearskin scabbard.

"Don't—don't cut me!" quavered the frightened wretch.

"If I do, it'll be because you prefer the cold steel to the cold truth," grimly laughed Gabe Gunn, playing with the blade as he closely scanned the face of his captive for a brief space, then sharply uttering: "What woman were you assaulting when you got creased, Caleb?"

"I never—there wasn't—"

The point of that blade swept swiftly down to pause just as it pricked the skin of his lip, cutting his hasty denial short.

"You lie, dog!" and the manner of the moun—

taineer changed completely, and not for the better, so far as the doom of this wretch was concerned. "My own ears caught the sound, and—will you speak?"

The knife-point drew back a few inches, but still remaining in sight. And Dipson faintly muttered:

"I don't know—it was the man I wanted most."

"What man? Name him!"

"Stranger—money—"

"I believe you are lying still, Caleb," showing his teeth grimly. "I'll come back at you again after—Where does the gang hang out, my honest fellow? And is Sadia Galway still the queen bee?"

"I don't—I never—I'll take oath that—"

The speech died away in his throat as the Grizzly from Ginseng broke into a harsh laugh, one muscular hand gripping his throat, the other lifting a blade over his panting bosom.

"You will have it, you lying cur? You deny them, when I know you are still a member of the evil gang? Now—sell them out, or die!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SERAPH IN REBELLION.

"E-A-S-Y, Gabriel!"

The Grizzly from Ginseng seemed on the point of plunging his keen weapon through the breast of his helpless captive, when those familiar words smote upon his ear, and caused him to turn his head with a start.

To behold Saul Sunday thrusting his head through the bushes, both hands steadying a cocked and leveled revolver.

"Ef you was to stick that pore critter, jest think what a p'izen mess it would make, Gabriel!"

The gleaming weapon lowered a trifle, but its owner still maintained his fierce clutch and showed no further signs of releasing his prey. And there was an ugly menace underlying his words as he growled:

"It's my muss, boss, an' your chippin' in won't make it any better!"

"Mebbe no an' mebbe yes, but we won't spute over a word, Gabriel. I don't want to be too hard onto ye, critter, but—I never thought I was takin' a thief into my sarvice—no I never didn't, now!"

Even by the dim light afforded by the twinkling stars, a change could be seen to come over that shaggy face, and Gabe Gunn hoarsely ejaculated:

"A thief! You dare to call me a thief?"

He seemed to forget his captive in the fierce rage born of that degrading epithet, for he released his grasp and sprang to his feet, seemingly about to leap at the throat of the speaker.

Solemn Saul apparently interpreted his action thus, and despite his revolver, he visibly shrank from such a collision with the mountaineer, hastily crying out:

"They's thieves, an' thieves as isn't thieves, so to speak, Gabriel, an' one o' them I meant you was which—don't ye see?"

Either this half-apology satisfied Gabe Gunn for the moment, or else he took alarm at the strange keenness with which the gaunt thimble-rigger was scanning his face, seemingly amazed by his complete change of tone and manner of speaking. Whatever might be the cause, his uplifted arm slowly dropped to his side, and he uttered in his usual uncouth style of speaking:

"Ef ye didn't raally mean it, boss, no matter: but thief is a mighty ugly word to fling in a honest man's teeth—so it is, now!"

"An' yit—not to 'fend ye too loud, Gabriel," with a ghostly smile forcing itself into his melancholy visage, as he pressed through the bushes and fairly entered the little amphitheater. "Ef a critter runs off with what ain't raally hisn, most folks would say that was stealin', wouldn't they? An' so—But we'll play ye only tuck the critter. Why did ye do it, Gabriel?"

Caleb Dipson had not been choked to insensibility, though his throat would not soon lose the effect of that fierce grip. He believed his fate was surely sealed unless he could escape from the clutches of that human grizzly, and taking advantage of that discussion, he tried to creep away unheard. But fate was against him that night. A loose stone turned beneath his knee, and in saving himself, he caused a sound that reached the keen ears of his captor.

He was looking over his shoulder at the time, and seeing Gabe Gunn start at the sound, he made a desperate plunge for the bushes, only to be caught and hurled savagely to the ground, the Grizzly holding him down with one knee upon his breast, facing Saul Sunday with the words:

"Never you mind why or fer what I tuck him, 'oss! 'Nough that my reasons is my own. 'Nough that I'll keep my grip ontel I 'arn all I want to know. An' ef you're wise, you'll shet your peepers an' go hunt them that wants to see you wuss than I do—jest now!"

Sunday tugged dubiously at his goat-like beard, his long visage full of half-angry perplexity as he mumbled:

"But—durn it all, Gabriel! Didn't I win ye

fa'r? Didn't I win your time an' sarvices an' 'bedience? Didn't you 'gree to be my seraph fer a year an' a day to come?"

"That's all right, boss," but with increased doggedness in voice and looks. "In all ord'nary things I'll live up to the 'greement. But this ain't common. This counts more to me then my life, ye want to know. An'—boss or no boss! I'll make this critter squeal himself dry, or I'll skin him inch by inch from top to toe!"

"Don't let him—save me from him, if you're—"

"A rijiment cain't save you, Caleb," coldly interposed the Grizzly, crushing his struggles beneath his heavy knee. "You kin save yourself by talkin' free, but only that way!"

Solemn Saul seemed glad to catch at a fairly respectable method of extricating himself from a disagreeable dilemma, and cheerily cried:

"Ef that's all! Ef it's only a bit o' 'fession! Chirk up, pardner, an' don't let a 'weenty bit o' trifle like them cast ye down in the everlastin' dumps! Why—I'd talk the bark off a white ellum knot afore I'd be skun all a-kickin'!"

He put up his revolver, advancing with a genial smile upon his lank face, squatting down beside the captive, apparently unconscious of the lowering looks which Gabe Gunn bestowed upon him.

"You ain't nigh such a fool as you look, stranger," he said, brushing the mingled dirt and blood from the frightened fellow's face with a bony hand. "You'll make the best o' what's heap better then bein' skun all over by a amateur. You'll talk a blue streak, an' p'int it straight as a string at the mark Gabriel sots up fer ye—now, won't ye, honey?"

As he uttered these words, Solemn Saul screened his own face with a hand, and while pretending to readjust his hat, winked and blinked prodigiously at his sullen seraph.

"They ain't no need o' coaxin', boss," that unruly angel growled, in response to those grotesque signals. "I kin make the critter understand jest what I want to find out, an' ef he cain't or won't spiel to order, cff comes his jacket ef a dozen like you tried fer to hold it on tight."

Solemn Saul shrank slightly, as though hurt in his feelings at this rude reception of his well-meant efforts, but his tones were still placable as he uttered:

"Of course he'll talk, an' talk right sweet, too! Why wouldn't he? Ain't a man's hide wuth more to him then all the sercuts in the world? Ugh! It sets the shivers crawlin' all over me, jest to think!"

He drew back still further, giving Gabe Gunn greater liberty, but that worthy changed his position so that the captive rascal lay between them, and he could have both under his watchful gaze at the same time. As he did so, he flashed a sullen but significant look into the face of his master. Plain as open speech, that look warned Saul Sunday against further interference with his plans.

The thimble-rigger said nothing, though his face showed that he failed not to rightly interpret the full import of that grim warning. He looked as though he wished himself fairly out of the scrape, but was apparently ashamed to beat an open retreat.

"You heard what I said to the boss, Caleb," deliberately spoke the Grizzly from Ginseng, a touch of his muscular hand forcing the face of his victim to turn until their eyes met each other. "I don't need to say it over ag'in. All I do say is this: as true as them stars is shinin' up yender in the blue heavens, jest so sure I'll make you suffer wuss then the skeeriest mind kin fancy, an' it in a nightmar' dream!"

"What have I done to deserve such treatment?" huskily faltered Caleb Dipson, his words hardly articulate owing to his fright.

"Tain't so much what ye've done as what ye don't want to do," with a short, grim laugh. "But let that wait. I've told you what is to come in a sart'in case. I'll tell you what'll come in another."

"You sing the song I set afore ye, an' sing it true to note. You answer all the questions I ax, an' answer 'em straight. You do all this without a balk, an' when I've proved your words true I'll turn ye loose to run the len'th o' your rope."

"But—if I don't know all you want to learn?"

"Then off comes your pelt, Caleb."

"Ef he won't tell, you mean, Gabriel," ventured Sunday, meekly. "Not ef he cain't tell."

"I mean jest what I say," sullenly scowling at the thimble-rigger. "Must I tell you ag'in that I'm my own boss fer this one night, seraph or no seraph?"

Solemn Saul subsided with a faint sigh, though there was an ominous glitter in his quickly veiling eyes that ought to have warned the unruly seraph of possible danger in too blunt talk.

"Fu'st, Cale Dipson, let me tell you that I know heap more 'bout you an' the comp'ny you've bin keepin' fer the past few years, then you mought think likely. An' this bein' so, better think twice afore you try to pass a false note off fer true music—see?"

"I can't tell what I don't know," mumbled the prisoner.

"It's what you do know I'm divin' after, Caleb," with a grim smile, that caused his shaggy beard to bristle even more ferociously than nature intended. "So—who is the real head o' the gang you train with in Falcon City, Cale Dipson?"

"Ross Kearney, I reckon, if you call it garg," was the sullen reply.

"You're dead sure o' that, Cale?" with dangerous calmness. "You ain't ashamed to own up that you sail under a petticoat, be ye?"

"I don't—What do you mean, anyway?"

"They was a woman, fer we hearn her yelp, right from the spot whar we found you, jest a bit later," broke in the thimble-rigger, his strong interest betraying itself in both face and voice. "Who was that woman, durn ye? Was it—ef they was only light 'nough fer to see a pictur, I'd—Got a match, pardner?" turning to Gabe Gunn, holding out a hand for the article asked for, while he fumbled in his bosom for the photograph of his lost or mythical "seraph," seemingly forgetful of the fact that he had "sworn off" for that night, at least.

The mountaineer scowled blackly at the other, brushing his hand aside impatiently. Yet he seemed to wait for an answer to the eager question, before resuming his own inquisition.

"I don't—I saw a man abusing a woman, and when she screamed for help, I tried to aid her. The rascal shot, and—"

A heavy hand closed his lips and smothered the rest of his brilliant fabrication on which he was already beginning to congratulate himself. And Gabe Gunn coldly uttered:

"I told you what to look fer, Cale Dipson, ef you tried to stuff me with a pack o' lies. You want a tetch o' the knife, an' durned ef I ain't goin' to satisfy that cravin', right now an' here!"

"Easy, Gabriel!" ventured the thimble-rigger, but with a perceptible quaver to his voice that showed how slight faith he had in his own influence, after what had already passed between them. "Don't be too awful brash, pardner! Give him 'nother chance fer to—eh?"

Still keeping a hand over the mouth of his terrified captive, the Grizzly from Ginseng swiftly drew a revolver and covered the protesting thimble-rigger with its muzzle, his voice low but resolute as he pronounced the words:

"You've said heap too much, boss, an' you don't want to say no more. This is my little game. I ketched it. I toted it c'lar here. I've got it under my paw, an' they don't a man live big enough or smart enough fer to break my grip afore I'm ready to let go o' my own free will."

"But—didn't you 'gree fer to be my seraph?"

"That don't count no longer," doggedly. "Yit—ef it wasn't I felt under debt to you, so to speak, I'd shoot an' never say a word. As it is—you climb out o' this, an' stay put! I don't want to drill you, but—I'm waitin' fer to see your back, boss!"

Solemn Saul hesitated, but only long enough to take one fair look into those glowing eyes. Then he rose to his feet, stepping backward until he reached the bushes. And Caleb Dipson caught the muttered words that extinguished his last faint hope of earthly salvation:

"Sold ag'in! He ain't nigh so much seraph as I tuk him fer!"

CHAPTER XVII.

BITTER SWEET.

LEFT to himself, Allen Bryson would almost certainly have fallen a victim to the jealous treachery of Cale Dipson, for wholly wrapped up in his fight for love and true love's sweet recompense, he heard nothing of those pantherish footfalls, suspected nothing of that savage approach, until warned by the fear-shaken voice of his promised wife.

He turned on the instant, but too late to escape that vicious blow entirely, though the deadly "life-preserver" alighted upon his left shoulder instead of his head as its owner intended should be the case.

"Now I have got you!" snarled the assassin in ferocious joy as the young man staggered back, seemingly about to fall to the ground.

Partially eluded though it had been, that stroke was a bad one, and for the moment it felt as though his arm was broken. Maddened by the thought of being thus disabled, just when he needed all his bodily powers the most, Bryson hastily drew a revolver and fired just as Cale Dipson was aiming a second stroke, at the time cursing viciously at the wild, frenzied shriek which Essie Brown gave birth as she saw her lover apparently falling.

There was no time to think of taking aim, and Bryson drew trigger as his weapon jerked upward, but the snap-shot proved effectual enough. Dipson gave a short, choking groan as he flung his arms up, his head back, the coward's weapon dropping from his unnerved fingers, to hang by its loop from his wrist. His body bowed suddenly forward as his legs gave way beneath his weight, and he fell heavily on his face in the sand.

It was well for the lovers that the one shot alone was needed, for in her wild terror and

wilder fears for her beloved, Essie caught Allen in her arms, thinking to ease his falling form and—

"Quick, little one!" panted Bryson, his uninjured arm closing about her waist and urging her from the spot as he muttered: "We mustn't be found near here, or—haste, Essie, if you care for life and liberty!"

His left arm hung swaying with his steps, seemingly dead, save when its owner strove to use it. Then an excruciating tingle would shoot along its nerves to remind him of the injury he had received, and intensify his belief that he was indeed a cripple. But that belief did not suffice to rob him of his natural nerve and coolness, and though he felt the odds were terribly against them, he made the most of their chances.

It was almost certain that the shot and the shrill shriek combined would attract many to the spot, and from the words already let drop by his love, Bryson knew that bitter enemies must be on guard against him and his hope's fruition. To flee aimlessly might only carry him the sooner into their toils, and so, with rare coolness under the circumstances, he drew Essie into the densest shadows hard at hand, listening for the sounds of alarm which—

He caught the wild yell of Saul Sunday as that worthy turned the corner nearest the Headlight, and with this for a guide, he hurried Essie at a sharp angle across a vacant lot, again crouching down under cover just in time to escape detection by the keen-eyed thimble-rigger as he came dashing up to the spot where Cale Dipson lay insensible.

"Thank Heaven!" panted Bryson, as he saw the party dash off in a direction almost opposite to that where they crouched.

The hand of fate seemed protecting them through all.

He did not notice the shaggy figure crouching by the side of the dastard who had dropped at his pistol-shot, and even if he had he would hardly have dared delay their flight longer.

"Essie—my love?" he muttered, bringing his face closer to hers as he sought to learn how she was undergoing the ordeal, more than half-fearing her senses had fled. "Good! we'll laugh at them, even yet!" he added, with a grim pleasure in voice and face as her dark eyes answered his unspoken question.

There was no resistance as his lips sought hers for an instant, and Essie rose unaided in her eagerness to escape from the spot which had come so terribly near being fatal to the one for whom she would gladly lay down her own weary life.

Despite the pain which it gave him, Allen Bryson made another test of his injured arm, giving a little ejaculation of delight as he found he could double the member, thus positively proving that no bones had been broken by that dastard stroke.

"I'm worth a dozen cripples, little woman!" he uttered, as he cast a swift glance all around them, giving a little start as he saw a dark figure rise up from under the scraggy tree, to move rapidly away through the night.

Essie Brown noticed the same object, and each jumped to the same conclusion, though with very different feelings.

"Let him go—for now!" grimly muttered the man, his eyes glowing vividly as the shadow melted away from their sight. "I've got his photograph, and maybe we'll meet again."

"He'll return—he'll come back with help to murder you!"

"Then he'll have to do some close searching, little one," laughed Bryson, taking pity on her evident terror and leading her away from the spot, his sound arm clasped lovingly about her waist.

Essie Brown raised no objections. Her one thought and wish just then was to place space between Cale Dipson and the man she loved, never so dearly and wholly as now, that she was trying to force him from her presence for all time.

Allen Bryson was but slightly acquainted with Falcon City, and had hardly the ghost of an idea as to his present whereabouts, but he hardly gave that fact a thought just then, his sole object being to keep under comparative cover until he could win his love's consent to seek a safe haven in company.

All sounds of search and blind pursuit had died away. They were in a portion of the decaying town which seemed entirely lifeless. The few scattered buildings were dark and silent, as though their one-time inhabitants had fled from the doomed town in too great haste to sell or tear down the shelter which had been erected with such bright and glowing hopes for the future.

"Essie," softly uttered Bryson, his arm drawing the maiden closer to his side as they slowly walked along through the shadows. "Essie, did you ever give a thought to all my tortures, all the pain and distress which your brief note of parting occasioned me?"

"Don't—there is no time to waste, Allen! You must make good your escape from town, or—"

"I must first come to a perfect understanding with you, Essie," was the grave interrup-

tion on his part. "Time enough after that to think of running or of standing my ground."

"Another time—when—you do not even guess!"

"I have worn myself out with vain attempts at guessing, love," but with a trace of anger mingling with his regret and affection. "And now that I have you fairly in my arms—now that I have found you, my love then, my love now, my wife that is to be—I'll never let you pass from my sight until I know everything, until I know just why you treated me so cruelly, little woman!"

"Do you know—for a time I was like one on whose head heaven's bitterest curse had fallen! I suffered all the torments of the damned, yet was so benumbed, so paralyzed in brain and will that I could only stand and suffer—my God! how I suffered!" his voice choking with the remembrance.

Only for a brief space. He caught the poor girl's moan, he felt her shivering as she tried to slip from his clasping arm, and that told him how cruelly he was repaying the pain she had dealt out to him in the days gone by; pain so acute that he could not endure the thought of making her feel even the shadow of it, now.

He drew her still closer, bending his head and touching her lips with his own, then gazing long and tenderly into her tear-dimmed eyes.

"Then—but now, my love! Now—I am happy and the old wounds are forgotten, for I have found you, found my love, my bride, my wife that shall be before the close of another day!"

He thought to relieve her pain and soothe the smart inflicted by his passionate tongue, but he was trying to build on an unknown foundation, and naturally the fabric tumbled about his ears.

"No, no!" panted the maiden, drawing back her head and faintly trying to break from his arms, her pale face showing terror and pain even more plainly than echoed in her broken voice. "It can never be, I tell you, Allen Bryson! The bare thought is enough to call down heaven's blackest vengeance upon my poor head!"

Her words were too wild, too improbable, too much like those of a poor child frightened more than half out of its senses, for them to produce the effect wished for. Bryson grew graver in face and manner, but his strong arm clasped her yet more tenderly.

"You are still too much excited to realize just what you say, little pet," gently moving away from the spot, but still keeping to the more lonely parts while pleading his cause with rare patience for one of his naturally quick temper and imperious will. "If you have sinned, it has been against me, not against Heaven. And if I forgive—as I do and did, long ago—be sure no higher power will ever call you to account on that score."

"And then, Essie, love, even if your feelings for me—the love you once freely owned I had won for all time! Even if your feelings for me have suffered a change, I will bring them to life again. But I can't believe that!" with sudden fire in his tones as he added: "You are not a woman to love one day and grow cold the next! You loved me then, or your sweet eyes lied! You love me still, even as I adore you!"

Poor Essie! The fire of his words broke down her feeble resistance, and with a sobbing cry she turned to fling her arms about his neck, to lift her lips to his, there to touch and cling with wild fervor.

A single breath thus, then she drew back with a choking cry.

"I knew it, Essie!" his great joy causing his eyes to shine through the gloom with a brilliancy equal to that of the twinkling stars over their heads. "Mine—all mine, now! Not all the world can part us again, my love, my angel, my own wife!"

With a motion so swift and unexpected that he could not guard against it, the maiden broke away from his embrace, her white hand waving him back as he would have advanced, her face strangely pale, her right hand hidden in her bosom as though to smother the mad throbbings of her overtasked heart.

"For the last time, Allen!" her tones broken, despite her evident efforts to the contrary. "I was mad to yield, even so far, but it will never be again, and I—I did love you so truly!"

"Did? You mean do, little one," soothingly. "If you will have it so—do love you so truly, Allen," with enforced calmness pitiful in its pathos. "Loved you so madly that death would have been but a trifle in comparison with parting as we parted!"

"Let it pass, Essie," frightened despite his nerve by the strange light in her eyes. "We are united now, and only death can divide us."

"It will—it shall, unless you listen to my warning and act upon it without further delay, Allen Bryson. Every minute lost here but increases your peril. You must flee from Falcon City, and never come to these evil parts again, no matter what plausible message comes to you, no matter how cunningly those fiends in human shape bait a trap for your taking! Go—and at once, Allen Bryson!"

"If I do go without you, Essie," was his grave, almost harsh response, "it will be to the

death you speak of. Either you go with me, as my love, my wife, or—well, I'll never see the sun rise to-morrow!"

For a single breath the poor girl stood in despair, but as she saw how grimly her lover was in earnest as he made that threat, her right hand came out from her bosom and the starlight shone from a bare blade as it rose above her swelling breast.

"Not you, my love, but I will die!" she panted, hysterically.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A TOO PERSISTENT LOVER.

IT was the action of one driven wild with trouble and sorrow, but there was nothing of weakness or indecision in the arm that drove, or the brain that impelled that gleaming weapon, and only the hand of a true lover could have checked the stroke in time to preserve life.

Even as it was, swiftly as Allen Bryson moved and acted, the keen point of the weapon fairly touched the cloth, and even pricked the soft, white flesh beneath, before his fingers could wrest the ugly steel aside, to toss it far away through the night.

"Essie—merciful heavens, girl! are you mad?" he gasped, clasping her tightly in his arms, trembling like a leaf, now that the horrible peril was fairly averted.

There was no reply. Her powers seemed exhausted by that final burst of resolution, and she lay unresisting in his arms, her face white as that of a corpse, her eyes closed, only her fitful breathing telling him that life still belonged to the being whom he never loved more madly than in that moment.

He sought to lift her in his arms, to bear her away to a place where she could receive better care and attention than he could give her in that lonesome spot, but his strength was unequal to the task. The terrible fright had completely unnerved him for the time being, and he sunk down upon the ground, hardly able to preserve his loved one from the shock of falling.

That weakness lasted but a little while, though his prostration was complete for the time. He was more like his usual self when, a few minutes later, Essie Brown opened her eyes and gazed into his pale face with a strangely composed air. And even more strangely sounded her voice as she uttered the words:

"I thank you for sparing me the crime of suicide, Allen, though it would be a merciful release from all I am and must still suffer."

"You were mad for the moment, little girl," he soothingly replied, tightening his embrace as the maiden stirred as if to arise. "You have been so terribly frightened—that dastardly knave—"

"I was mad, Allen," with a faint smile, "but I am mad no longer. Let me arise, please."

He rose with her, curiously impressed by that strange quiet which had come into her manner and her tone. It almost frightened him, the contrast was so sharply drawn.

"I was mad, because I thought I could frighten you to seek safety without wholly laying bare my own shame."

"Essie!"

"It is simple truth, Allen, and since you will not go away without a full explanation, you must listen to me without further interruption. Even now the golden opportunity may have fled!" with a brief return to her more natural agitation.

"With you as my companion, Essie, I'll never permit you out of my sight again until you are bound to me by the laws of man, even as the ties of Heaven have already united us."

"You are the one suffering from madness now, Allen," with just the ghost of a smile flitting across her pallid features; a smile that was more heartrending than the hottest, bitterest sobs or tears. "You and I can never be more to each other than we are now; and we are separated as widely as if a score graves lay between."

With an effort of will Allen Bryson crushed down his hot impatience at this renewed struggle, just when he felt most sure his victory was fairly won.

"Essie, you talk in enigmas. You are making mountains out of a pitiful molehill. Do you think for a moment that I'll give you up now, when you yourself have confessed that you never loved me more dearly, more wholly? If you had learned to hate and despise me, it would be different. Self-respect would nerve me to—I'm lying, and you know it!" with a short, hard laugh as he flung out one hand sharply. "Not even that would make me yield my claims on you, little woman! Not even—Essie, are you blind? Do you still think that I am in the dark as to what makes you try to run away from my arms?"

He stopped short, frightened for an instant by the effect of his own words. The maiden gave a gasping moan, shrinking back, her head bowing, her face sinking into her hands, her lithe figure shivering as from an attack of ague.

"It is because your father has taken to evil courses, Essie," her lover added, his arms once more infolding her tenderly. "You think some of his disgrace attaches to you—poor little child," his bronzed cheek resting caressingly against

her bowed head as he murmured: "As if I could ever think of that, my pet! As if— But granted I was base and foolish enough to think so, what then? I love you so dearly, so entirely, that I would still think myself a gainer. Ay! even if I knew you were the daughter of the man who struck my poor father down to an untimely grave, years ago, I'd still refuse to give you up! I love you, Essie, and you are mine—mine until the grave divides us!"

He felt her stir in his arms as though she would be free, and he at once relaxed his embrace, smiling brightly as he gazed into her face when she lifted her eyes once more to his.

"That is the measure of my love, Essie," he said, his tones low, soft, musical, they expressed so much of what now filled his heart to overflowing. "I thought to let you learn all this for yourself, hoping that in so reading my heart, line by line, you would catch the contagion yourself, and so grow more nearly to love me as I would be loved; but now that you speak of leaving me forever, I must try to show you just how great a sin you are committing against the man you loved—once!"

He tried to keep back that one word, but could not. He had suffered so much himself, that—after all, human nature is pitifully weak.

Perhaps had the maiden shown more emotion at his really eloquent appeal, in manner if not in words, he could have kept back that barbed shaft, but Essie Brown stood silently before him, giving no sign of emotion other than by an occasional shiver as if from a chill. And when he ceased, and she stood confronting him, her voice was as cold and steady as her face and figure.

"I will answer that, when I have performed the stern duty which drove me out into the night, Allen Bryson," she began, speaking more rapidly after the ice was fairly broken.

"You are right. I have a father who is a criminal. He belongs to a band of vilest criminals, and I fear that he is one of the vilest of the vile. I, his daughter, force myself to tell you this, Allen Bryson."

"And I tell you, Essie, that it cannot shake my determination in the slightest degree. I love you. I mean to make you my wife, just as you promised to become, in the time gone by."

"It is gone by, never more to return, Allen," with a slight catching of her breath before hurriedly resuming: "But I am wasting precious time in idle talk. Even now it may be too late for you to escape from the snare that evil gang has been setting for you! Even now—go, if you ever loved me!" her old agitation returning with the thought. "They are coming—they may pounce upon you at any moment."

"With you, Essie," was the calm response.

"Never without you."

The words seemed to recall her strange coldness, and she added:

"I heard them plotting it all, from where they kept me shut up, a close prisoner. There was Ross Kearney, Caleb Dipson, my father, and—worst, most pitiless of all—Sadie Galway!"

"I've heard of them all, Essie. I have seen all save Dipson—"

"He tried to kill you but a little while ago!"

"And for the second time in one night," grimly laughed Bryson at this information. "We'll look at it as a good omen, Essie, and believe that all their snares may fail just as signally as these two. But—why have they arranged to put me out of the way? Did you learn that, little pet, while listening to the gentle people?"

"I heard all. But I don't think Dipson was acting on orders from Sultana Sate, as she is called," speaking with forced calmness. "I know that when he threatened to murder you, she caused his capture and made him swear not to lift hand or weapon against your life until—until after—"

A flush crept into her fair face, and despite herself she was forced to droop her eyes. It was hard to utter the words, even though so much might depend upon his knowing the whole truth.

"An obedient knave, truly!" laughed Bryson, shortly. "If Sultana Sate is always obeyed so implicitly, she must have a jolly time in dealing out rewards—or otherwise!"

"Have I not said enough to warn you, Allen?" faintly.

"Plenty for warning, but not enough to frighten me from my heaven on earth, Essie," came the swift response as his arms sought to again infold her form.

But a backward step foiled him, and fearing to still further drive her from him, Bryson stood motionless, only his glowing eyes keeping up his fight for her subjection through the power of ardent love.

"Then—it is hard, Allen," her voice so low as to be hardly audible even to his love-sharpened ears. "If only my own life was at stake, I could not utter the words that—listen, Allen, and if you ever loved me as a true man should love one so much weaker than himself, I beg of you to turn from me and save your dear life!"

"I am listening, Essie. I will answer your present words after I have heard what else you have to say."

"They mean to capture you. They mean to

threaten your life and even use torture until—until I will promise to marry you, in order to save the man they know I love," hurriedly uttered the poor girl, her face flushed, her eyes downcast.

Bryson started in genuine amazement, for least of all had he expected to hear such an announcement. And almost involuntarily he cried:

"And you call them my enemies, Essie? Marry you? Yet you warn me to flee—to escape worse than death!"

"You mistake—you do not understand all," hurriedly interrupted the young woman, recoiling a little and covering her face with her hands. "It is not because—they have no thoughts of— It is all an atrocious scheme to rob you of your wealth, don't you see? They would make me marry you to save your life, and they would murder you as soon as they could coax or force you to sign some papers. I don't just understand what, or how, but I heard them talking it all over, and I know that you are lost unless you escape from Falcon City before they can find you!"

In her eager fear Essie lifted her head and gazed imploringly up into his face, to give a low, despairing sigh as she saw how brightly he was smiling, how little he looked like running away from the threatened marriage.

His hands caught her, his arms folded her to his breast once more, and there was music in his tones as the words came forth:

"Is that all, Essie? Why, my poor, trembling little dove, every dollar I own in the world would be a wretched pittance to pay for such a glorious gift! And when I make them comprehend this—when I show them how little I care for money with you in the other scale, be sure they'll never care to add the risk of blood-letting. "No, no, little woman! Such a fate is powerless to drive me away. It is only another reason for my sticking closer to you!"

"What shall I do? What can I do to make you believe?" moaned the tortured girl, to be cut short by a clear, mocking voice from the night:

"Hold your peace and see him put to the test! Down him, lads!"

And as though they sprung up from the earth itself, half a dozen sturdy men pounced upon the lovers, bearing both to the ground, one tearing Essie away while the others quickly bound and gagged her lover, despite his desperate struggles. And Sultana ate laughed as Essie sobbed.

CHAPTER XIX.

THAT WAY MADNESS LIES.

WITH his heavy revolver Gabe Gunn followed the reluctant motions of Saul Sunday until the tall figure and half-awed, half-reproachful face vanished through the bushes. And with that evanishment, the Grizzly from Ginseng apparently permitted all memory of his recent master to fade away as well.

He lowered his weapon as his glowing eyes came back to the face of his captive, over whose lips that muscular palm was still resting. He hung over the craven wretch in grim silence for a brief space, then broke the silence as follows:

"Did you really think a crack-brained mountebank like that could save you from my grip, Caleb Dipson? Have you so completely forgotten the man who—"

He stopped short, the tinkle of his bear-claw collar seeming to startle him. His eyes bent that way, and then he broke into a short, harsh laugh, scarcely less terrifying than his menaces and threats.

"I forgot—I am Gabe Gunn, the Grizzly from Ginseng!"

"I never harmed you," ventured Dipson huskily.

"Nor will I harm you, Caleb, if you sing true to note," was the swift comment.

"I'll sing—I'll confess everything, if you promise—"

"I never take a header into unknown waters, Caleb," was the cold interposition. "I've told you how the little joker works; you make a clean breast of it all, and tell me everything I seek to learn, and I'll spare your pelt for the next man who has a mortgage on it. You fail to sing true, or you have forgotten the notes—well, there'll be no nimble-fingered tramp to hold back my hand this time!"

Cale Dipson shivered more violently than ever. If anything, this cool, careless tone and manner was more terrifying than the other. A madman might spare, if only through forgetting, but a devil—never.

Gabe Gunn put up his revolver, squatting down by the side of his prisoner and deftly binding his hands and feet with strong thongs produced from about his person, paying not the slightest attention to the trembling protests, the husky prayers for pity and mercy. Not until his task was thoroughly completed did he answer any of these.

"Yet a little longer, Caleb," his tones cool and even as he fell to work shaping a rude but effectual gag with thongs by which it could be secured firmly in place when called for. "Not that I mean to make use of it exactly now, for I'm yearning to listen to that sweet organ of yours. But—it'll come handy to help you hold your

tongue when I try how neatly I can take off that thick hide of yours."

Wrapping the thongs about the gag as he spoke, Gabe Gunn placed the article on the trembling breast of his tortured prisoner. Then his manner changed abruptly, his voice sinking lower but sounding all the more deadly for that, his eyes glowing redly as they hung over the helpless wretch.

"Once more, Caleb Dipson, I ask you to name the members of the evil gang with whom you are allied, in Falcon City."

The fellow was too badly frightened to attempt either denial or deceit, where only those whom he had already half-sworn revenge upon, was concerned, and he quickly rattled off a number of names, among them Ross Kearney, Ben Brown and Sadie Galway, or Sultana Sate as he called the woman-head of the evil aggregation. There were a number of other names, but they need not be repeated in this connection.

Still Gabe Gunn did not appear content. He scowled darkly, keenly peering into the face of his captive like one who more than half-suspects a material reservation. And Cale Dipson shivered as he shrunk, his whirling brain reverting to fair Essie Brown.

"I've named every one of the gang that figures in town," he desperately declared, forcing his bloodshot eyes to fairly encounter those blazing orbs. "There is never another, and if—"

"Don't let your tongue run away with you, Caleb," as a finger lightly filiped his lips. "Tell me more about this Sultana Sate of yours: of her age, her looks, her characteristics. Is she tall, queenly in figure and slow of movement? Is that why you dub her Sultana? Or is it from her Spanish complexion and marvelous black eyes?"

There was an undercurrent of eagerness in these questions which Caleb Dipson could detect, despite his own fears, and for a moment he debated whether he had not best fall in with the evident wish of this madman. But then, how could he know it was not a cunning trap to catch him tripping? Better stick to the simple truth as long as possible.

Gabe Gunn frowned darker and darker as Dipson corrected his impressions of Sultana Sate, but he made no immediate response when the captive ceased his description.

What had he expected? Was he searching for a woman who would answer to the hasty description given in those questions?

The thought gave Dipson a sense of relief, for if so, then he could have no particular interest in Essie Brown, as he had been led to fear from his own captivity so shortly after assaulting the lovers.

"There should be another—there must be!" with a flash of irritable fire as he gazed keenly into the face of the bound sinner. "You are lying to me, Cale Dipson! There is another woman connected with the gang of which you are a member, and you are risking worse than death in trying to conceal the fact! Must I warn you again?"

"There is only a girl—a child—"

He stopped short with a spasm of fear as those mighty hands fell upon him, shaking his frame until his teeth fairly clicked together, until it seemed as though his neck must be unjointed.

"A girl—a child?" grated the Grizzly, hoarsely, conquering his savage outburst by a desperate effort, sinking back upon his heels and whipping his hands behind him as if the better to fight against temptation. "And you dared to keep that news from me?"

"I didn't—her father—I mentioned him, and—"

Once more he stopped short, terrified by the awful change which he was forced to witness in the face of the man who held his life or death in the hollow of his hand.

"Her father? What do you know about her father?" slowly demanded Gabriel Gunn. "Tell me, quick! And breathe a lie at your peril!"

As briefly and clearly as possible in his sorely shaken condition, Cale Dipson obeyed, describing the age, looks and general appearance of Essie Brown, together with the fact that her father, Ben Brown, was a prominent member of the gang under command of Sultana Sate.

In silence Gabe Gunn listened, his eyes fixed unwinkingly upon the frightened face of his captive, seemingly striving to read the truth or falsity of his confession. And he still kept silence when Dipson ceased speaking, though his eyes slowly drooped, his head sunk forward until his shaggy chin touched his bosom and nothing of his face could be seen by the trembling wretch whose fate depended upon his whim.

Each moment was an age of torture to the helpless ruffian, though he dared not make a move to break the spell of his own accord. He began to believe he had fallen into the clutches of a madman, and this bloodcurdling fancy was hardly dispelled by the muttered words which presently fell from those bearded lips:

"Is it—can it be? Am I on the wrong scent, after all? Or—my child! my poor, stolen darling! Her father—Ben Brown? If I—"

He left the sentence incomplete, lifting his head and bursting into a harsh, mirthless laugh as he clasped his hands and shook them toward the twinkling stars above the globe.

"Is there no truth, even in the heavens above? Is all a lie, false as hell itself? I begin to believe it! How can I help so doing, while—Hal!" springing to his feet and recoiling from the frightened captive, even as his muscular hands stretched out toward him, fingers working like hungry talons the while. "Do you hear that? Kill him! Tear him limb from limb and try to read the terrible truth in his blood!"

With a choking cry for help, the terrified prisoner rolled over and over, madly striving to get upon his feet, forgetful of his bonds, of all save that hideous face and glowing eyes—the face and eyes of a madman!

With a wild laugh the Grizzly from Ginseng leaped upon him and checked his frantic struggles, rolling him back to his former position and holding him flat on his back with a knee pressing suffocatingly upon his chest while picking up the gag and unwinding the thongs attached to it.

The desperate attempt at flight seemed to partially restore his senses, for he acted and spoke more naturally after securing the gag in place. For as soon as this was effected, Dipson being too greatly exhausted by his vain struggles and weakened by fright to offer more than a feeble, spasmodic resistance, the mountaineer drew back a little, squatting on his heels and slowly uttering:

"You broke the red cloud just in time, Caleb Dipson, and I thank you for it. I may have to wipe you out—something tells me I must, in the end—but not until you have told the truth, the whole truth!"

Dipson strove to speak, the effort lifting his head slightly, but Gabe Gunn pushed him back impatiently, frowning black as midnight:

"I know what you would say, but better for you that your tongue is chained. A little more—a very little more, Caleb Dipson! I've undergone too much of late years to bear up as I could once. It takes so very little to send my brain whirling and reeling and dancing! And at such times—did you ever hear the devil singing in your ears, Caleb? Did you ever have him laugh and jeer and urge you on to—"

He caught at his throat with a strange, choking gurgle, flinging back his shaggy head and swelling his massive chest as he struggled to his feet, staggering until he gradually steadied himself by spreading his legs widely. Then, as suddenly as the strange fit had overtaken him, Gabe Gunn calmed down. One long, sighing breath, and he seemed once more his usual self.

He brushed a hand across his eyes, then looked down upon the shivering wretch lying helplessly at his feet.

"I still believe you could tell me what I have so long and wearily sought to discover, Caleb Dipson, if you only would. If I did not—if I knew I was on the wrong scent—But I dare not think of that, now! I must cool my brain. I must gather something of my old will. If not—I might weaken the next time to see only fragments where you now lie a strong, healthy man, Caleb!"

He turned his face away, his whole attitude that of a man wrestling against a hideous temptation, and as he watched with protruding eyes, the helpless ruffian suffered almost worse than death.

In a few moments Gabe Gunn seemed to conquer his insane passions, but his voice was harsh and strained as he bent over his captive.

"I must go—I must flee this temptation, Caleb Dipson, unless I am to ruin my last hope by killing you. Not that you deserve better treatment! Not that—never mind," drawing back with an evil struggle. "I will go, to come back when I can question you with more calmness. Think it over, Caleb. Make up your mind to tell the whole truth, without reservation, or your last feeble hope shall expire!"

He turned and plunged through the shrubbery growing between the white rocks, vanishing from sight, though his footsteps could still be distinguished by the terrified captive.

Scarcely had these died out in the distance than Caleb Dipson began a desperate struggle with his bonds, feeling that unless he could make his escape before that promised return, his fate was indeed sealed.

Desperately, but in vain. The thongs would not give, and he could not stretch them an atom. Yet he persisted with the mad despair which a man can only feed with the prospect of such a hideous fate before him, until—merciful heavens! He caught the sounds of a human being pressing through the bushes, coming directly toward him! Then—

"Sufferin' grandpap! Ain't he jest a holy terror? An' to think! He ringed hisself in onto me fer a seraph! Mournful Moses—he did so!"

CHAPTER XX.

SOLENN SAUL DRIVES A BARGAIN.

SAUL SUNDAY, to make the use of an expressive saying, would "never be hung for his beauty," but just then his long, sallow face looked far sweeter to the bloodshot eyes of Caleb

Dipson than had ever the fair countenance of the young woman whose charms had led him into this terrible situation.

He lifted his head, sufficient to catch a glimpse of that face as it separated the bushes, and his lungs almost burst with his frantic efforts to cry out for help.

"Hist!" sharply hissed the thimble-rigger, his face the very picture of alarm as he turned his head from side to side, seemingly expecting to behold the giant mountaineer leaping upon them in all his madness. "Fer the love o' Moses, critter, don't ye yelp a whisper louder than the echo o' nothin'! Ef ye do—sufferin' grandpap!"

His head suddenly vanished amid the bushes like the head of a frightened turtle retreating into its shell, and poor Dipson almost swooned away with mingled fright and disappointed hopes. Only the return of Gabe Gunn could account for that hasty retreat, and with his coming would vanish the last faint ray of hope.

A few seconds later, the bushes again parted, this time to permit the complete entrance of the thimble-rigger, who announced his coming with:

"Ef I didn't think—not that I was skeered, mind ye, pardner, but just tuck kinder short in the wind! Ef I didn't think I hearn that crazy critter comin' back fer to finish up his doin's, hope may never find my Seraphina Angelica this side o'—What's that?"

With a cat-like leap Saul Sunday cleared the bound figure and gained the nearest cover on that side, his gaunt visage the personification of terror until the alarming cause was repeated; the note of an owl among the rocks high above them.

The thimble-rigger drew a long breath of relief, drawing a hand across his brow as he forced a laugh which ended in a doleful groan.

"It's all 'long o' my bu'stin' that vow wide open, an' I jest know it!" more to himself than for the benefit of the bound wretch who was desperately trying to call attention to his bonds. "Ef I only hed my tools! I'm clean lost 'bout 'em handy! An' mebbe that fat cuss 'll set his own self up in business an' break—hellow!" with a start and sudden alteration of manner as Caleb Dipson managed to roll himself over. "Be blamed ef I wasn't clean forgettin' what—stiddy, pardner! It's bein' in sech a pesky hurry that makes my han' trim'le so out o' all reason, but—thar!" as the gag yielded to the touch of his knife.

"Save—free—run, before—" gasped Dipson, unable to use his vocal organs more clearly in those first moments.

But he could make his meaning clear enough, and Saul Sunday bent over his feet, cutting the tensely drawn thongs with a single slash of that keen blade.

"Hands—fight that—devil!" gasped Dipson, rolling over on his face to facilitate that operation, as his temporarily benumbed feet told him he could not place any dependence upon them for the present.

But Saul Sunday was slower to act on this occasion. He even fell back a pace, as he uttered slowly:

"E-a-s-y, pardner! Ef I sot ye clean free, how kin I be sure you won't be tryin' fer to climb up my own back? How kin I—"

"I'll swear—I'll serve you as a slave for life!"

"No, ye don't, nuther!" with almost ludicrous rapidity. "I ain't in that sort o' business no longer. Once is a plenty fer me, an' ef you was to show wings sproutin' all over the hump o' ye, pardner, still I wouldn't hitch on—sufferin' grandpap! hain't I got one more seraph a'ready then I know what to do with? Hain't I—waal, now, you jest hush, honey!"

"But he'll come back! He'll murder me like—help me to my feet, then, if you'll do no more, and give me at least a chance for my life!"

"I'll do that, pardner, an' mebbe I'll do more, come to think!" the thimble-rigger exclaimed, lending a hand and steadying the ruffian on his benumbed feet. "Mebbe I'll cut them ropes, after all!"

"I'll pay you every dollar—"

"Stiddy, pardner!" muttered Sunday, lending the support of his wiry arm to the half-crazed wretch. "Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no. Mebbe I'll hitch teams with you, an' mebbe I'll do the contrary. But whether or which, we want to climb out o' this yer' crazy den the fastest the law 'lows us. Fer ef that pesky seraph should—What's that?"

From down the hill came a sound which might well have been caused by the hasty return of Gabe Gunn, and the two men hurried through the bushes, making their way over the rough ground as rapidly as the darkness and all else would permit. Saul Sunday seemed fully as badly frightened as Caleb Dipson himself, though armed and with weapons to defend himself.

"It's the cuss them sperrets piled onto me!" he muttered, brokenly, as he aided the ruffian to flee. "It's to pay fer me throwin' off the spell afore I'd done all they p'inted fer me to do! Sufferin' grandpap! ef I only hed my tools back ag'in!"

That headlong flight lasted for many minutes, and terminated only when Caleb Dipson

tripped and fell breathless. Handicapped by his arms being bound, weakened by the loss of blood and still more by the mental tortures he had undergone, he was helpless for the time being.

Realizing this, Saul Sunday crouched down beside him, revolver in hand, looking and listening for their pursuer. But if such there had been, he was almost certainly thrown off the scent in the darkness, for not a sound came to tell of his approach.

"An' I ain't losin' no salt water over it, nyther!" frankly admitted the thimble-rigger. "I never did sot up fer a chief o' anythin' louder then the little joker. An' ef I've lost a seraph this blessed night, I ain't noways in a hurry to find him—sufferin' grandpap, no!"

"Won't you set me free?" pleaded Dipson. "If you're afraid of that devil, think of me! Think what it would be for me to meet him, my hands tied behind me! Even with them free it would be bad enough, until I could find me a weapon of some sort."

"Like these, fer instance," chuckled Solenn Saul, producing the identical weapons which had been stripped from his person by the Grizzly from Ginseng. "I run onto 'em while I was snoopin' 'round that crazy critter's trap, an' sorter reckoned I mought jest as well fetch 'em along fer—Look here, pardner!"

There came a complete change over his manner as he uttered these last words. He slipped closer to Dipson, who was sitting up and staring half-scared into his gaunt visage.

"I'll cut them ropes. I'll give you back your own tools. I'll stand up, shoulder to shoulder, give an' take, sink an' swim, even ef a hull regiment o' seraphs should jump out at us, every durned one on 'em crazier then a mad bedbug! I say I'll do this—ef you'll do somethin' else! An' that somethin' else is—pardner!"

"I'll agree to anything—only set my hands free and give me my gun!" hurriedly uttered the ruffian, hope flashing into his eyes.

"E-a-s-y, pardner!" drawled the thimble-rigger, sliding back a bit as the other leaned forward. "A trade is a trade, but they's no sure barg'in ever made 'thout both sides knows jest what they're tradin' onto. An' so—pardner?"

"Well?" Dipson forced himself to ask, though trembling like a leaf with eager impatience, mingled with a sickening dread lest, after all, this queer customer should be simply playing with him in malice.

"Mebbe I wasn't so pesky bad skeered as I let on when I backed out o' that seraph's sight, pardner! Mebbe I hed a kink o' my own to unravel, an' mebbe they wasn't so many minnits that my ole gun hedn't got a bee-line drawn onto that same seraph's cabeza, ready fer to lay him down to sleep off his crankiness."

"I know—I believe it all, but—your price, man!"

"Waal, they do say every human critter hes his price, an' ef I've got mine, 'tain't to be wondered at so hard—eb?" with a faint grin as he dubiously tugged at his goat-like beard, keenly though furtively studying the ruffian through his nearly-closed lids. "An' so—I say pardner! You're a bit of a crook your own self, ef you wasn't lyin' clean through to my dandy little seraph back yender! An' so—I'm ownin' up that I'm kinder off-color my own self—sufferin' gran'pap—yes!"

Caleb Dipson groaned with mingled fear, rage and disgust. Would this prosy idiot never come to the point?

"E-a-s-y, pardner," laughed Solenn Saul, rightly interpreting that sound. "They's the biggest part o' the night still afore us, an' ef it's skeer o' the seraph that troubles ye wust, never mind it! I'll agree fer to perfect ye from all sech, ef I hev to send him howlin' up to the kentry whar one nat'ally looks fer sech critters as them."

"But ef you're so hot-set, I'll tell ye right out: Take me down to whar your gang meets an' vouch fer me as a clean crook, an' I'll set you free so quick it'll make your head swim!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BLIND LEADING THE BLIND.

INTENSE though his longing was to be set free, with weapons in his hands by use of which he might hope to hold his own against that object of his dread, Gabriel Gunn, Caleb Dipson stared mutely at the eager thimble-rigger.

Why was Saul Sunday willing to risk so much for so little? What were his real reasons for wanting a friendly introduction to the evil gang commanded by Sultana Sate? Was—

"That's my offer, pardner, an' you kin take it or leave it, jest as you like. I won't say a word ag'in it eyther way, but ef you leave it, then I leave you, jest as I found ye a bit sence."

"You don't mean—"

"It'd be heap sight meaner, now wouldn't it? Ef I was to steal off a critter the seraph sets sech a store by? An' me git nothin' good out o' that same stealin'? Waal, pardner, ef I do hev to say it in my own favor, I'm heap sight too mighty honest fer to stoop so low as to be guilty o' sech a trick as them!"

"I'll agree—I'll promise anything—only cut

these infernal cords! Seems like I can hear that mad devil coming every moment!"

It seemed that it was Saul Sunday's turn to hesitate, and he made no forward move. If anything he drew back a little, combing his chin-tuft with a bony finger tip.

"E-a-s-y, pardner! Mebbe they ain't sech a 'tarnal rush. Mebbe I'd better find out ef you kin do all I want o' ye, fu'st."

"I'll agree—I'll swear to anything, curse you!" snarled Cale Dipson, his mingled fears, rage and disappointment getting the better of his prudence. "Only cut me loose!"

"That was jest the way it hit me, my own self, pardner," with a faint grin wrinkling his sallow skin. "All of a sudden thinks I; what ef the gent was paintin' hisself black all over, jest beca'se he tuck a notion the seraph liked that 'plexion best? What ef he was lyin' all the time so good might come unto him, an' he didn't hev nothin' to do with that gang after all? Then—whar'd I come out at? Wouldn't he jest jump me, too quick? Wouldn't he run me head-on fer the cooler, an' use my own 'fessions fer a cork to stop the neck o' the jug?"

Cale Dipson felt that he would almost sacrifice a hand if he could only have his other fingers about that throat for a single grip. This was but another form of torture, and almost as hard to bear. But he took warning by the slip he had already made, and forced himself to speak calmly, frankly, calling his eyes and his face to aid him as much as possible.

"I swear to you that I spoke the whole truth when that mad demon questioned me, and if you were watching and listening, you'd ought to be certain of so much. I was too badly frightened to even think of lying, then. And now—I'm too grateful for what you have done, for what I pray you will do further to lie to you. So I repeat; I'm a member of the gang at whose head stands Sultana Sate. I will introduce you to them, and vouch for you as a thorough crook, if you want. Can I say more than this, pardner?"

"Nough's enough, an' any more'd be a superfluous plenty, Caleb," chuckled Sunday, as the remaining thongs yielded to his keen blade. "An' I ax your pardon hearty ef I've 'peared to keep ye too long in limbo, pardner, but you see—Shell I chafe 'em up a weenty bit, Caleb?"

With a low, eager cry, Dipson tried to snatch up the weapons which the thimble-rigger placed on the ground beside him, but his cramped fingers proved unable to the task, though the blood renewing its circulation was already causing his flesh to prickle and smart.

Without waiting for permission, Solemn Saul caught the crippled members in his hands and began chafing the discolored flesh, his tongue just as busy as his long fingers.

"You see, pardner, it's a sort o' groundhog case with me, an' I'll tell ye why. I'm pritty much of a stranger in these parts, though I hed a sorter hint o' what class o' comp'ny I mought run across, ef so be I was lucky an' didn't make too many bad breaks. An'—Mebbe you kin say ef this yer' gang o' yours ever do anythin' in the way o' green goods, Caleb?"

Dipson gave a start at this abrupt query, and the eager light he noted in those little gray eyes half-frightened him. But before he could measure his answer, Saul Sunday hurriedly added:

"I'll tell ye why, pardner. An' then you'll see why I'm huntin' up them as kin be 'pended onto as backers, so to speak. An'—Waal, I never made sech a nasty slip afore in the bull course o' my travels, which is sayin' a mighty heap! But—I never 'spicioned that Ross Kearney was one o' the elect, an' so, ye see, when he shuck his boodle at me, I kivered it. An' somehow I putt up the wrong sort o' paper."

Fer the durned critter that held stakes jumped the game an' tuck my wad with him! It wasn't wuth so mighty much, by its own self, but ef he gits mad enough over it to send a hint to the lawful 'thorities as to the sort o' paper I tote? Eh, pardner?"

There was a peculiar hesitation in his manner, a half-frightened, half-bold light in his eyes and on his sallow face, that carried with it a conviction of truth, and Caleb Dipson lost his last doubts as he looked and listened.

"Kearney is all right, I reckon, but who was the other? Why do you think he was connected with Ross?"

"Beca'se they both skipped out in comp'ny, when I wasn't lookin'. Ef it wasn't to whack up, why not? An' so, you see, I want to hev a bit o' talk with 'em both, afore they kin do any harm to a feller crook. An' that's why I tuck so much resk an' trouble fer to scoop ye out o' Gabriel's grip!"

By this time Cale Dipson found he could use his hands fairly well, and though the touch of his trusty weapons lent him something of his olden nerve, he was only too anxious to leave that lonely spot for a safer retreat, where he might meet Gabe Gunn on more even terms in case that madman should succeed in tracking down his intended victim.

He was too anxious on this score to think of asking for a description of the supposed confed-

erate of Ross Kearney, nor did Solemn Saul volunteer the information.

The thimble-rigger seemed in high glee as he followed the lead of his latest ally down from the hills toward Falcon City, and his tongue kept wagging freely whenever the nature of their course would permit.

"You see, pardner, they's a mighty sight o' chaintes fer a gent in my line o' business to git sht o' the stuff, an' I don't mind sayin' to you that I've done my sheer o' floatin' the flimsies o' late years, though I've hed some mighty close rubs, an' more'n once reckoned I couldn't git along without a pardner or two. An' so, when I ketched a hint that they was a gang up in this region that was doin'—eh?"

It proved to be a false alarm, however, but as they were now close upon Falcon City, even the voluble thimble-rigger realized the wisdom of bridling his tongue until a more favorable opportunity.

Caleb Dipson led the way direct for the old house in which Ben Brown resided, though he hardly anticipated finding there the prize he valued so highly. And the little cry which broke from his lips as he caught sight of a dim light shining through the curtained window, betrayed his doubts as to finding any person at the place, in fact.

Without a thought of Solemn Saul, or of the reception which he might himself receive in his eagerness to learn what had become of Essie Brown, the ruffian hurried forward and sharply rapped on the door, giving the signal customarily used by the members of the gang, followed by that which indicated himself as plainly as though he had pronounced his full name.

The door swung open as by magic, and the clear, mellow voice of Sultana Sate called out:

"Come in, Caleb! We have been expecting you for an hour past!"

She stood facing the door, dressed as we saw her last, in masculine garb, with cigar between her red lips, but unmistakably a woman despite all that.

There was a smile upon her face, and she looked in remarkably good humor, but Caleb Dipson hesitated on the threshold, for all that. For the first time he began to doubt if he had not acted blindly in coming back to his allies, without first trying to ascertain just how much of his later actions they had learned.

But before he could make a motion to retreat, if indeed he would have been so rash, an excited ejaculation came from behind and Saul Sunday actually thrust Dipson into the room, though apparently unintentionally, for he seemed almost too excited to realize his own actions.

"Kin it—be it—my Seraph, or I'm a har!" he spluttered, plucking that faded photograph from his bosom and fairly devouring that beautiful face with his sparkling eyes. "Seraphina Angelica Lovejoy! Seraph fer short, an' Angel by them—eh?"

Sultana Sate whipped forth a pistol and thrust its muzzle almost against that sallow face as she sharply demanded:

"How dare you? Who are you, and what do you want here?"

Solemn Saul shrunk back a pace, his jaw drooping, his gaze wandering from her face to that of the photograph, doubt and despair beginning to mingle in his paling visage.

"Kin I—be I fooled ag'in? Kin they be two sech lovely faces in one weenty globe like this? An'—tell me true, mum-mister," with a bewildered glance from face to garb, then back again as he timidly extended the card: "Ef this ain't your pictur', mum-mister, why—"

Sultana Sate cast one brief glance at the sun-picture, and despite herself she broke into a laugh at the ridiculous idea; she so gay, so brilliant, so beautiful; that so dim, so prim and angular, so antiquated in its precise ugliness.

Solemn Saul seemed awed by that laugh, and meekly fell aside, leaving Sultana Sate to confront Caleb Dipson, whose naturally florid face was now as pale as dirt and streaks of dried blood would admit.

Ross Kearney had quietly closed and secured the door, standing by it as though on guard duty. To one side Ben Brown sat on a backless chair, cushioned with a gray blanket, his figure doubled up in a heap, but with his strange eyes riveted upon the ruffian with dull hatred.

He had only time to note this before Sultana Sate addressed him again, but what he saw was enough to send a thrill of fear through his depleted veins, for he believed his flagrant disobedience had been discovered, and that his punishment would fall as swift as heavy.

"Well, Caleb, you have returned at last!"

"Where is she? Where is Essie?" he hoarsely panted, realizing that only boldness could avail him aught just then.

"Where should she be, Caleb?" smiled Sultana Sate. "You saw how peacefully she was sleeping in yonder. Would you like another stolen glance at the dainty little morsel, Caleb?"

"Curse your mockery!" he flashed, desperately. "She's gone—fled to the arms of that infernal pigeon whom you lured hither! Didn't I see them? Didn't I hear him call her his—"

"And even under such tremendous provocation you remembered your sacred pledge to me, Caleb? Even then you could not resist the temp-

tation to drain his heart dry? Noble comrade! Truest of the true! Faithful beyond the power of words to portray! How shall I reward you, Caleb?"

A blinder man than Dipson could not have overlooked his real peril, and knowing that all was lost, he resolved to at least taste of revenge before he died.

But even as his hand clutched the butt of a revolver, Sultana Sate flung up her hand and cried, sternly:

"Take him, Brown!"

Even as she spoke, Ben Brown flung that heavy blanket over Dipson's head, hurling him helplessly to the floor. And Sultana Sate whirled to point a cocked revolver at Saul Sunday as she harshly cried:

"Now, what have you got to say about it, stranger?"

CHAPTER XXII.

MAKING THE BEST OF A BAD BARGAIN.

"NEVER a word, mum-mister, an' I couldn't ef I was to try; sufferin' grandpap—no!"

Saul Sunday flung up his empty hands as he burst forth thus, trying hard to put a bluff, frank front on, but shrinking visibly from that leveled pistol and those viciously flashing eyes.

Ross Kearney came forward, his strong hand closing on the shoulder of the thimble-rigger as he nodded to Sultana Sate, saying:

"I'll go bail for his good behavior, your Majesty, while—"

"A fri'nd in need is a—eh?"

"While you finish with that cur. If he tries any of his tricks, I'll break his neck," coldly finished the tall gambler, pushing his charge back until further progress was checked by the wall.

A deft trip with a foot caused Solemn Saul to drop abruptly to the floor, and pushing his head back until it thumped sharply against the partition, Ross Kearney muttered in grim warning:

"Stay put, stranger, unless you're weary of this world."

Sultana Sate plainly placed perfect confidence in the gambler, for through all this she never once turned her head from watching the flaxen-haired ruffian who was deftly completing the subjection of Cale Dipson.

Blinded, hampered, almost suffocated by the folds of that heavy blanket, and gripped in arms nearly doubly as strong as his, even if met on an equal footing, Dipson stood but a faint show. And he was unable to even complete his attempt to draw his pistol, before the shock of his fall on the floor broke his grasp.

Seemingly Ben Brown anticipated some such encounter, for he was fully supplied with materials for binding his once master, which feat he accomplished with exceeding neatness and dispatch.

"I've done what you bade me, your Majesty," he uttered, rising to his feet and lifting a hand in salute. "All the same, I'd rather have taken the shortest road out of the woods!"

Sultana Sate paid no attention to that grimly significant speech, beyond letting the ghost of a smile flit across her darkly beautiful face. She moved forward far enough to rudely spurn the bound figure with the toe of her boot, then coldly uttered:

"You have your orders. Carry them out to the letter. If you pass one step beyond them, it will be as great a sin as if you fell short a full mile! Take the cur away. He pollutes the very air!"

Ben Brown stooped over the groaning, gasping figure, lifting it in his muscular arms, bending under his burden as he left the room by a narrow door at the other end from the door which opened into the dark room occupied by Essie Brown a few hours earlier in the night.

When he had vanished from view, Sultana Sate turned toward Solemn Saul, frowning darkly as he tried to force a smile as he met her gaze.

"Who are you, fellow?" she demanded, coldly.

"A pore, sufferin', wanderin' critter with a cuss piled onto his back wuss then the pack which Christian hed to tote clean—Saul Sunday, mum-mister!" snapping out the name with ludicrous haste as he caught her warning gesture.

"He's the fellow I spoke to you about, your Majesty," quietly explained Ross Kearney. "I reckon he's a little bit more than he tries to make out, for if he wasn't playing a part down at the Headlight, I'm wildly out in my calculation!"

"Playin'!" spluttered the thimble-rigger, with intense disgust in his tones and printed upon his gaunt face. "Waal, I never was wuss played in my life then I've been played fer a durned fool by that—I say, mum-mister, cain't ye jest give the p'izen critter one fer me, while you're payin' him out fer yourseif? Ef I thought it wouldn't be 'posin' onto good natur', I'd even ax ef I mought climb him my own self!"

"Who are you? What led you here?"

"That's jest it!" with a dejected groan, more than ever looking the man of unlimited woes. "I was led here, a blind sacrifice to—Ef I hed only knowed all I know now, up yender, wouldn't I, though!"

"I give you my opinion, and you can take it

for what you think it's worth, your Majesty," coldly uttered Kearney. "I believe this fellow to be a spy or detective. What he wants, I don't undertake to say."

"Sufferin' grandpap!" ejaculated Sunday, his jaw dropping and his little eyes opening to their fullest extent. "Me? A de—good Lawd!"

"Do you deny that you are something more than you wish to have appear on the surface? Do you deny that you were playing a part while all that racket was going on in the Headlight?" persisted Kearney.

"Waal, as fer that much," hesitated the thimble-rigger, casting an uneasy glance around the room, like one who fears to catch sight of some disagreeable object.

"Talk sharp, clear and to the point, fellow!" frowned Sultana Sate, toying meaningly with her beautiful pistol. "If you have nothing evil underneath, where's the need of hatching up a story? The plain truth is good enough for ears such as ours!"

"I wasn't hatchin'—I was only—"

"Out with it!"

"Sufferin' grandpap!" gasped Solemn Saul, closing his eyes to shut out that grimly menacing muzzle. "I was only lookin' fer the man that held them stakes, mister!"

"What of him? What has he to do with this affair? What do you know of him, and why should you expect to see him with us or here?"

"Then—didn't he skip off 'long o' you? Ain't he an' you in cahoots? An'—you ain't kickin' over them crooked bills?" spluttered the thimble-rigger, his eyes flying open, his face losing a portion of its fright as he glanced keenly from face to face.

With a muttered oath of impatient disgust, Ross Kearney leaned forward and shook a finger before that gaunt visage, sternly uttering:

"Will you sing straight, Saul Sunday? Lies can't save you, but the flat truth may—possibly!"

"Ef I must—I'm a crook, then!" desperately. "I was fooled into comin' to this place by that durned fraud, Cale Dipson, who said you was all crooks like he was an' I was, an'—"

"Wait a bit, stranger," interrupted Kearney, acting on a slight gesture from Sultana Sate. "You say you are a crook: what are we to infer from those words?"

"Mebbe I kin make 'em plainer," recklessly uttered the thimble-rigger, like one who means to cross the stream, now he has fairly taken the plunge. "By crook, I mean that I don't always keep on the lawful side o' the fence, though I make it a pint not to git so fur off that I can't mighty soon hop 'crost the 'vision line back ag'in. An' so—waal, I made a mistake to-night, boss, an' kivered your good money with green goods—so thar!"

With a long breath that was half-defiance, half-apprehension, the thimble-rigger leaned back against the partition, his little eyes roving swiftly from one face to the other, trying to read therein his fate, even before it should be pronounced by their lips.

"And that other fellow?" slowly asked Kearney. "That Grizzly from Ginseng, as he chose to dub himself; is he another crook, and were you playing in partnership to fleece the lambs?"

"Ef he is, I never knowed it then, but sence—sufferin' grandpap to miseryation!" with a burst of curiously-mingled disgust and indignation. "Sence— I'm mighty nigh open to bet long odds that the pesky critter is heap wu'ss than crooked?"

"By which you mean—"

"That he's a spy an' a detective an' a— The hull list o' p'izen mean words that ye kin think of in a long summer's day, boss! An' I do reckon he jest played seraph off onto me fer to make sure o' his evidence ag'inst me afore he give me the collar! I jest do, now!"

Sultana Sate made a sign to Kearney, and the tall gambler followed her across the room to a position near the door, where they could talk in guarded tones without being overheard, and at the same time keep the thimble-rigger under watch, in case he should attempt an escape, or show other signs of causing trouble.

But Solemn Saul made no move, though his manner of watching their actions told plainly enough that he was ill at ease, and by no means confident of a favorable ending to his present venture. And his face clearly betrayed a mind disturbed as they came toward him again.

"You say you are a crook, Saul Sunday," coldly uttered Sultana Sate, pausing just without his reach should be spring to his feet. "I see no cause for doubting your own estimate, and since your confession was purely voluntary, you can hardly blame us for believing it true, and acting accordingly. Now—"

There came a slight clicking sound as a panel flew open directly above the spot where Solemn Saul was sitting on the floor, with his head resting against the partition. And before he could move, or even utter a cry, two hairy hands shot out of the trap and closed about his throat, holding him as in a garrote!

CHAPTER XXIII.

"SUFFERIN' GRANDPAP!"

As swift in her way as the owner of those hairy paws himself, Sultana Sate menaced the

trapped thimble-rigger with her pistol, her tones full of stern intimidation as she warned him:

"Not a whimper above your breath, my covey! Try to yelp aloud, and I'll see if a bullet will flatten on that precious skull of yours without going deeper than the hide!"

"Sufferin' grandpap!"

The words barely managed to escape his lips, though hardly audible to other ears, but apparently the owner of those ape-like paws construed it as an infraction of the queen's commands, for the deadly grip tightened until it seemed as though those fingers must meet through the neck, unless the vertebra should snap first.

"Ease up a bit, Jack Ketch," coldly interposed Ross Kearney, after a glance toward Sultana Sate as if expecting her to interfere.

Instantly that muscular garrote relaxed, but then contracted as before, as no other voice came promptly. Plainly as words could have stated the case, the unseen executioner considered himself entirely in the employ of the woman chief.

A slight flush came into the face of the tall sport, but he closed his lips firmly, folding his arms and gazing coldly into that darkening face, now suffering all the agonies of slow suffocation.

Sultana Sate realized this equally as well, but seemed in no particular haste to put an end to the torture. She smiled blandly as her red lips poured forth a curl of cigar smoke, then easily uttered:

"You can ease your fingers a little bit, Jacky, if you like. That must be pretty much like trying to squeeze juice out of a piece of whit-leather!"

The muscular fingers relaxed, and Saul Sunday caught his breath with a wheezing, rattling sound. But before he could speak, or regain his eyesight, Sultana Sate whipped a large silk handkerchief from her side pocket, tossing it to Ross Kearney with the words:

"He looks like a dying mule, pardner! Just cover those lovely orbs with that, will you?"

In cold silence she was obeyed, the soft fabric being folded and refolded until not a ray of light could possibly penetrate the bandage as it passed over the eyes of the thimble-rigger, to be knotted securely behind his head.

There was no difficulty in arranging this, for the owner of those hairy paws held his captive under complete control, pushing his head forward until clear of the partition wall, then drawing it back again as the bandage was secured in place.

Nor did Solemn Saul offer any resistance. That terrible grip had apparently robbed him of all strength, both of mind and body, for though he was armed and his hands were still at liberty, he made no attempt to fight for revenge if not for life.

Sultana Sate apparently expected something of this sort, for she uttered a short, sneering laugh as the job was completed, then said:

"You might take his tools, pardner, if you think it worth while. I hardly think he knows how to use them, though. Wonder—can we have mistaken a dung-hill for a true-bred game?"

There was no response, though the gambler followed her suggestion as far as disarming the thimble-rigger was concerned, falling back and placing the weapons on the rude table. Sultana Sate flashed a keen look into his face, but then turned away with a proud toss of her head.

"You can rest your fingers for a bit, Jack Ketch!" she coldly pronounced, moving a chair nearer to the man of many misfortunes and seating herself as though for a protracted session. "And you, Saul Sunday, as you term yourself, want to understand that the length of your life depends a good deal on how quietly you accept whatever fate may see fit to measure out for you."

"Sufferin' grandpap o' miseryation!" huskily panted the captive, yet clearly relieved by the falling away of that ugly grip.

Sultana Sate frowned, her dark eyes all aglow, her red lips sharply bitten prior to her further speech:

"Still trying to wear the mask? Have you not yet lost hopes of bamboozling us, fellow?"

"Hope may die ef—I only knowed what you'd like me to say best, mum-mister!" moaned the prisoner, still in doubts whether he had best be guided by masculine garb or feminine face.

"The plain, straightforward truth, of course! You have lied enough for a dozen, and you see what a sad strait it has brought you unto. Therefore, Saul Sunday, why not try a change, for luck?"

"So help me mother o' Moses! I've told the plum, straight, clean, sure-enough, ginewine truth from A to Ampersand an' all the way back ag'in!" earnestly affirmed the thimble-rigger, his tongue regaining no little of its usual fluency.

"And you swear that you are a genuine crook, Saul Sunday?"

The lantern-jaws parted as if to repeat the asseveration, but then closed with an audible click, while the color slowly, yet visibly faded out of that sallow face.

Sultana Sate laughed mockingly as she read

the truth in this hesitation, and there was a pitiless jeer in her voice as she added:

"How much would you be willing to give, oh Saul o' the Shells! if you could only be dead sure just which side of that division fence I and mine are occupying in society? But—you'll have to go it blind, my fine fellow, or else trust in the truth to carry you safely through. Take your choice, Saul Sunday!"

But that was just what the thimble-rigger seemed disinclined to do without further effort to feel the safest way out of his trouble, and he fell to groaning and rattling in his throat, as though that terrible grip had disabled his organs of speech.

Again Sultana Sate laughed, but now there was a touch of impatient anger in the notes that ought to have warned the prisoner he was playing with edged tools. But without wasting further time, the woman abruptly knelt before the man, her gloved hands swiftly and deftly stripping his person of the articles left thereon by Ross Kearney.

Among these was the well-filled wallet in which the thimble-rigger had stowed away his winnings that night at the Headlight, and Sultana Sate fell back to her chair with this in her hand, shaping a lap with womanly deftness despite her garb, emptying the pocketbook therein, laughing softly as she sorted over the mass of bank-notes.

With the skill of a life-long cashier or receiving teller, she separated the notes into two piles, crumpling the smaller one up and stowing it deftly out of sight, covering the sound with her mellow tones:

"Green goods, with a vengeance! Saul, Saul, you graceless rascal! what a glorious prize you would be for the Government to get hold of!"

The thimble-rigger caught at the real or fancied clew thus presented, as a drowning man is said to snatch at a straw.

"An' I kin tell 'em right whar they growed, too! I kin tell 'em the head critter o' the evil gang, mum-mister, an' prove by a hull heap o' crowds jest when an' whar an' why I got them wicked flimsies, too!"

"Then you were lying to us, Saul Sunday, when you declared yourself a crook?" sharply, sternly demanded the woman, her tones giving no indication of the malice which shone and sparkled in her jetty eyes.

"Sufferin' grandpap o' miseryation an' tarna! torment!" moaned the blinded thimble-rigger, once more tossed on the seas of doubt and indecision. "Ef I only knowed—ef I could jest—"

"Tell the truth and shame the devil," laughed Sultana Sate.

"Then he ain't fri'nd o' yours, no more'n he is o' mine! An' so—cross my heart an' double true, mum-mister, ef I ain't jest the crook I told ye fu'st-off!"

"And you have made no mistake this time, Saul Sunday?"

"I wish't I was so mighty sure o' that!" groaned the poor fellow, plainly on the rack. "Sufferin' grandpap! ef I could jest git my two grips onto that durned Cale Dipson! Ef I only could! He wouldn't lead no more honest men astray—no he jest wouldn't, now!"

"Honest, and yet a crook, Saul Sunday?" laughed Sultana Sate, keenly enjoying the torments of her captive, showing her cat-like nature without disguise. "Are you trying to straddle that famous fence of which you spoke, a bit ago? If so—beware a fall, my good fellow!"

"I'm pure honest ef you be, an' a clean crook ef you ain't!" desperately mumbled the thimble-rigger, driven into a corner from whence he lost all hope of escape. "Ef you're on the cross, them green goods is mine. Ef you're t'other-ways, then that durned seraph—may his wings sprout big enough to Kerry him down to the deepest pits o' Topbet, the fu'st time he tries 'em!"

"You mean the Grizzly from Ginseng? What and who is he, Saul?"

"I know what I wish't he was!" with vicious energy. "I wish't he was right whar I be now, an' that I was whar you be! Wouldn't I? Sufferin' grandpap!"

For a moment he seemed to forget his own precarious situation in contemplating the picture thus presented to his mind's eye, and with hands clinched tightly, he seemed about to leap up and precipitate himself upon his hated deceiver, when Sultana Sate lifted her hand and uttered a quick whistle.

Like magic those hairy paws reappeared through the still open panel, dropping a noose over the head of the thimble-rigger, jerking his head back until it thumped sharply against the wooden partition.

"Rise up, Saul Sunday," coldly uttered Sultana Sate, and her command was significantly emphasized by those hands tugging at the close-fitting noose, materially aiding the luckless fellow in scrambling to his feet.

"Don't—don't hang a pore critter!" gasped Solemn Saul, never more befittingly named than just now.

The connecting rope was drawn taut, causing him to closely hug the partition while stiffly erect. Even then the snug noose made it no easy task for him to speak without huskiness.

Unheeding, unanswering his quavering prayer, Sultana Sate stepped forward and deftly bound his hands before him, a couple of turns of the same cord about his body effectually guarding against his removing the noose from about his throat. Then she returned his property to his pockets, including the wallet containing the bills pronounced counterfeit, coldly speaking the while:

"You're a victim to your own evil propensities, Saul Sunday, I'm sadly afraid, but I hardly think the world will miss you very much. You may have all the petty meanness requisite for a crook, but you surely lack the common-sense without which failure is certain. If not, you would hardly have taken the bare word of a rascal ingrain such as Cale Dipson."

"We are no crooks, though he swore we were. I am free to admit that we are playing a little game of our own, which shaves tolerably close to that line-fence of which you made mention; but shaves it on the safe side, for all that."

"Now, Saul Sunday," falling back a little as her work of restoration was complete as far as it went, "I'm by no means sure that you are the crook you claimed to be. I half incline to the belief that you are one of those curses to humanity, a professional detective. If I knew this, and knew what I only suspect: that you are trying to get a finger into our private pie: I'd leave you after quite another fashion. But I'll give you the benefit of the doubt."

"Good-night, Saul Sunday! I'll drop a hint in the ears of those who may be curious to inspect that precious wallet of yours, and interested in learning just how and why you lug about such a liberal supply of what you facetiously term green goods. If you can satisfy them, all well and good! For by that time our pie will be fairly eaten, and you quite welcome to—smell of the dish!"

With a mocking laugh Sultana Sate turned away and left the helpless thimble-rigger to his fate.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FROM SLAVE TO MASTER.

WHEN Ben Brown left the room in which he had overpowered Cale Dipson, in obedience to the commands of his mistress, he crept along a dark and narrow passage, bending under his muffled burden, his task by no means lightened by the spasmodic struggles kept up by the nearly suffocated rascal inside the folds of that thick blanket.

"Kick and squirm, my angel!" the flaxen-haired captor chuckled in grim derision. "Begin to taste some of the sweets you've poured so lavishly over your betters? Begin to realize that every dog has his day? Well, yours has come and is going, Cale Dipson—going mighty fast, too!"

Still in the dark, Ben Brown carelessly dumped his burden on the floor, stooping to lift a small, square trap in the heavy planks, seemingly gifted with the vision of an owl. Then he grasped his prey by the heels and dragged him down a steep flight of steps, laughing harshly as he heard that muffled head thump-bump from step to step until the cool, damp ground-floor of a cellar was reached.

Leaving Dipson lying as he fell for the moment, Brown ran back to the room above, groping along until he struck a table, from which he lifted a kerosene lamp. With this he returned to the cellar, closing the trap-door after him.

He struck a match and lighted the lamp, placing it on a narrow niche in the rough stone-wall, back of which appeared rough boards, the whole looking like a window intended for ventilating purposes, but which had been closed up for some reason.

This done, Brown bent over his prisoner, removing the blanket and gazing keenly into that purple, swollen visage. There was no movement on the part of his victim, but his anxiety was quickly relieved.

"Not dead, but only slack of wind!" he chuckled, his eyes glowing like those of some dangerous wild beast as he gloated over his helpless captive. "If you only knew, Cale Dipson! If you could only guess what I hold in store for you, you'd try to die in a hurry! You'd pray—"

He broke off with a laugh of bitter scorn at the word which escaped his lips. There was so little in common with this evil wretch and words of prayer!

He hurriedly, yet surely, secured the hands of the reviving captive by means of the pliant rope which he had removed from about the blanket, then propped the man up in a corner where the reddish rays of the lamp fell fairly across his face, squatting down before him, impatient to begin his long-wished-for treat.

He was not kept waiting many minutes. The bloodshot eyes of Cale Dipson opened their lids, giving a start of horror as he beheld that weird face before him.

"Good, my dear fellow!" chuckled Ben Brown, rubbing his hands together in an excess of grim delight at this recognition. "I've longed and schemed for just such an interview as this, lol these many days!"

"Devil! Set me loose, or I'll twist the rope—"

With the swiftness of thought Brown swept his right hand past the face of his captive, knife in hand. And so sure was his aim, so carefully his distance measured, that the keen point of his glittering blade slit open those lips, without doing further damage.

"Speak when I bid you, cur!" he grated, wickedly, quivering the ugly weapon before that blenching face. "The time has past when you could utter such threats with impunity! It is my turn now, Caleb," his voice softening until it strangely resembled the purring of a huge cat. "It is my turn to play master to your slave! My turn to frown and your turn to cower and cringe and beg for mercy beneath your breath, Caleb!"

"It has been a long and a weary time, Caleb, and many a day have I felt sure I could not drag through another night without killing myself as the easiest and safest method of escaping from your torturing grip. And I would have done this, long since, only I feared to leave my poor girl wholly at your mercy. Hal hal!" with a hoarse, bitter laugh that caused the prisoner to cower and shiver with utter horror.

"Mercy, said I? Your mercy, Caleb Dipson? Did you ever learn the meaning of that curious word, Caleb, in your schoolboy days? Did you ever succeed in spelling it in the little old school-house where—Bah!" flinging back his head until his flossy hair flew out like a halo in that dim light. "I'll show you just what you learned through that word, Caleb; for the mercy you have bestowed upon me, that mercy am I about to return unto you this very night!"

"Spare me—have—"

Only so far did the craven ruffian venture, for once more that keen blade swept through the air before his face, only saved inflicting another gash by the involuntary ducking of his head close to the rough stone wall.

"Patience, Caleb, and you shall have all the mercy—of your own invention, remember!—you can stagger under," laughed Brown, smacking his lips as though enjoying a highly spiced feast. "Because, don't you know, her blessed Majesty has turned you over to me, her humblest and most obedient servant, to deal with as my own sweet will dictates."

Dipson moaned faintly, fearing to speak, yet unable to maintain perfect silence, knowing as he did how little lenience he deserved at the hands of this man, over whose head he had for long held the hangman's noose.

"Does it begin to rankle, good Caleb?" sneered Brown, maliciously protracting his long pondered vengeance, each moment of which was full of exquisite delight to his depraved mind. "You have played the master so many a long day, Caleb! You have enjoyed cracking your whip over the cowering head of your poor slave so hugely! Ayl it must come hard, very hard, Caleb, to realize that, all in one instant, you have fallen from your high estate to grovel in the mire! From master to slave! And—I am the master, now, Caleb! Don't let that escape your memory!"

"I'll never—I didn't mean all I threatened, Brown, and—"

"Benjamin Brown, Esquire, you hound!" flashed the flaxen-haired avenger, adding with a curious laugh: "Say it, Caleb! Say it, and add to the name and title, still another. Add master, you cur!" quivering his dangerous tool before that ghastly face.

Mechanically, like one who hardly realizes what his lips are shaping, Cale Dipson obeyed. And his tormentor laughed softly, sweetly, looking for all his marvelous hair, a veritable demon in that dim light.

"You may rest your tongue a bit, after that perfectly recited lesson, pardner," he uttered, speaking more naturally, having apparently worked off a goodly share of his ferocious hatred, or else meaning to make a future outburst all the more terrifying by an interval of seeming calm. "And while you are resting, I'll talk. It has been a mighty long time since I found you in such an accommodating humor, Caleb," with a low, mocking laugh. "I can hardly recall the day or night when I felt so free and easy in your company: so sure that you would not shut my trap with a blow or a curse, Caleb! Really, it recalls olden times, when you and I were famous chums. Before your thoughts began turning toward love, courtship and matrimony, Dipson."

"Then, in those days, if you recall, Caleb, I was rather the leading spirit of the two. Up to—well, I hardly think you have forgotten the date," his voice lowering and his strange eyes flashing over his shoulder for a single breath. "At least you have reminded me often enough of that black night!"

"Better for you if you had forgotten it years ago, Caleb! Better still if you had not taken the time and trouble to ferret out just who had a hand in that ugly job! For—only for that cursed inquisitiveness, you hound! you might not be lying here, doomed to suffer ten thousand deaths in one!"

"Spare me!" gasped the terrified wretch.

"I will, just as you have spared me and mine, Cale Dipson," with forced calmness. "Such pity as ye have meted out to me, that pity will I even return unto you, my old friend and com-

rade. And do you know just what shape my mercy will assume, Caleb?" leaning forward and throwing all the venom of years into his gaze as he slowly added: "I'll not kill you, Caleb. That would be but poor satisfaction for all you have made me and my little girl suffer. I'll only—leave you bound like a cur, to roast and sizzle as this building burns over your head!"

For a single breath Caleb Dipson stared in speechless horror into that satanic countenance, unable to fully comprehend the meaning of the words his ears caught so dully. But then the unutterably horrible truth flashed across his brain, and he uttered a frenzied shriek for help!

Only to have the sound cut short midway by that deadly grip which Ben Brown fastened upon his throat.

"Would you? Think you that any mortal being dare step between my slave and my vengeance?" hoarsely grated Brown, shaking him to and fro, then twisting him prone upon the damp earth and thrusting a gag into his gaping jaws.

When this was securely in place, he dragged the shivering wretch into the middle of the floor, leaving him lying on the broad of his back as he drew away, laughing viciously.

"You can watch the flames stealing closer to you, inch by inch, foot by foot, Caleb, as you lie thus! You can watch me as I show you how busily I have been preparing for your reception. For, Caleb, your doom was decreed within an hour from the moment you fired that treacherous shot at Allen Bryson. My daughter's lover, Caleb! My daughter's husband, as he will be even before the ashes cool above this tomb of yours!"

More like a maniac than a wholly sane man, Ben Brown caught up his lamp and moved about the spacious cellar, showing here and there bunches of rags and kindlings, all saturated with oil, fastened to the flooring and stowed away in each corner, on the cellar wall.

"Just as soon as the queen sounds her signal, Caleb, so be patient!" he laughed as he returned once more to the side of his helpless slave.

"That will not be long delayed. She will soon dispose of that meddling rascal whom you led so blindly into the trap with you. And maybe it will afford you some little comfort, Caleb, to know that you will have company other than the hungry rats in your little picnic! For, unless I widely mistake, the Sultana will leave Solemn Saul to roast in the room right above us! And—think of that, Caleb," with a jeering laugh. "When the floor burns through, he'll drop right down beside you! Ashes to ashes—yours and his shall mingle together, my old pard!"

Laughing wildly at the hideous fancy, he dragged Dipson a few feet to one side, measuring the rough flooring above them until satisfied he had calculated correctly.

Scarcely had he accomplished this, than he sprang erect with a gasping cry, bending his head in listening. A shrill, peculiar whistle came to his ears, and he caught up the lamp, to hurl its chimney to the ground, laughing fiercely as Dipson shrunk from the hot splinters which flew all over him.

"You'll soon get used to that, Caleb!" he chuckled as he passed the bared flame under bunch after bunch of the inflammable kindlings, they instantly catching fire and filling the cellar with a ruddy glow. "The rickety old shell will burn rarely when it once fairly catches! I could wish it were more substantial, for your sake, old pard, for I'd break my heart if it should go up in smoke without thoroughly warming you through to the very center of your big, your noble, your honest and faithful heart, Caleb!"

Already he had run the rounds, touching each prepared mass of kindlings, and now stood beside his groaning, writhing victim, gloating over his mental agony, seemingly forgetful of all else in the sweetness of his hideous vengeance. And he might have lingered thus until his own escape was completely cut off, but for the repeated signal from his impatient mistress above.

"Fare thee well, Caleb!" he laughed as he ran up the cellar steps and paused at the trap door to hurl his lighted lamp back into the pit, to burst as it fell. "I'll look for your bones in the morning!"

CHAPTER XXV.

LEFT TO THEIR FATE.

THE lock shattered by Cale Dipson in his mad haste to warn the schemers of the presence of Allen Bryson in Falcon City, had been replaced by another, thanks to the far-sighted Sultana Sate, and it was the key of this which she now turned as they left Saul Sunday to meditate over the uncertainties of this life.

Nothing was seen of the so-called "Jack Ketch." He of the hairy paws and ready obedience had left the building by another way, or else was lingering on guard over his neatly hampered captive.

Ross Kearney, cold and silent like one who might not interfere with a machine being run

by another, but who could and would protest against its conduct by his looks and manner, bore his Sultana company, pausing as she paused, keeping pace for pace almost as a shadow.

Sultana Sate sounded her signal whistle while inside the door of the room in which the gaunt thimble-rigger was trussed up, and she repeated the signal more sharply as soon as fairly without that apartment, her nostrils quivering as though they already scented smoke.

"Curses on the stupid! will he never turn up?" she muttered, flinging away her cigar in hot impatience. "Go look him up, Kearney. If the hot-headed rascal should linger too long, and get caught before—"

The sentence was left incomplete, for its author caught sight of Ben Brown coming toward them, laughing harshly, his eyes still glowing, his marvelous hair and beard crisped and curtailed by the flames his own hands had set in action.

"Bottle it, you bloodhound!" grated Sultana Sate, springing forward and gripping his arm fiercely, a gloved hand clinched and quivering in his face. "Would you taste the rope even before you had time to fully realize your vengeance, fool?"

"What is your wish, your Majesty?"

Like magic came a change over the flaxen haired ruffian. Only his wild, weird eyes retained aught of his unholy glee, and he stood cold and composed before his mistress, his head bowed in readiness to receive and carry out whatever orders she might see fit to pronounce.

"What did you do to—he will not raise an alarm?" demanded Sultana Sate, with a slight pause and a change in the form of her question.

"Not unless Satan works a miracle in his behalf, your Majesty!"

"You started the fire? You are sure the flames won't go out?"

"Not while aught remains to feed them, your Majesty."

"Come!" sternly muttered Ross Kearney, his strong hand closing on the arm of the woman, forcing her away from the spot. "I can smell the smoke from here! Are you both mad? Do you want the crowd to catch you waiting and watching for the old shell to burn?"

"Come you, Benjamin," laughed Sultana Sate, with a parting look at the doomed building, from which she could already catch dim streaks of growing flames, "I've got a few words of warning to whisper, and Ross is right so far; we don't want to have ugly looks cast our way over this melancholy accident!"

In silence Ben Brown obeyed, following their lead, but with his beard on shoulder and gaze fixed on that fated structure until it was no longer visible. It seemed like tearing heart from body to go away and leave his hated enemy to perish unseen, but Sultana Sate wielded a powerful influence over him, and he dared not rebel just then.

"Say what you wish, Sultana," muttered Ross Kearney as they came to a pause in the shadows, fairly out of sight of the house where two fellow-beings had been left to meet such a frightful death. "Say it as briefly as possible, for the alarm is bound to break out shortly, and we'll be a heap sight safer in other quarters!"

"I begin to feel somewhat that way myself," laughed the woman, with a nervous glance about them, "and so— Benjamin?"

"Your Majesty!"

"You are going to perish to-night, my poor rascal, and Falcon City will never more recognize its baby-haired cherubim! In other words, Brown, you must change your appearance as much as possible. Cut off your hair and beard. Don a wig and false whiskers. Or, better yet, go with your face bare, dyeing your skin to match your eyes. Better so, for then even Essie wouldn't recognize you!"

"And after I do this, your Majesty?"

"Lay low until you hear from me direct. It must be thoughts that you perished in the flames. In case—if there should be aught ugly unearthed by the curious fools, gossip might be satisfied without looking further, don't you see?" giving a curious little shiver as the last words passed her lips.

"Enough said!" hurriedly muttered Ross Kearney, his grip tightening on her arm and turning her face in the direction of safety. "Look at the growing light! Do you want the whole town to catch you here?"

"Not for Joseph!" laughed the woman, yielding to his impulse but adding the words: "Be off, 'Jack Robinson!' And remember, you are dead to the whole world in general, and Essie Brown in particular, from this hour henceforward!"

"I understand, your Majesty!"

Further speech would be dangerous, and neither party attempted any. Sultana Sate hurried along by the side of Ross Kearney, who led the way through the thickest of the gloom, keeping well upon the outskirts of the sleeping town, yet taking a tolerably direct course for the refuge which he had in view for this woman, whose safety was far more precious to him than his own.

He never once glanced behind them, but Sultana Sate did so repeatedly, possibly because of her sex, possibly because she felt so much more

interest in the tragic sequel to that little farce in which she had taken so prominent a part.

The starlight showed a look of curiously-mingled doubt, fear, anticipation, all in one, upon her darkly-beautiful face, but this ended as they drew near their destination. For behind them the heavens began to show a ruddy tinge. The gloom seemed melting away by degrees.

"Is it worth so much?" gloomily muttered Kearney, divining the meaning of that peculiar thrill, detected by his sensitive fingers as they clasped the arm of his companion.

"Growing chicken-hearted?" laughed Sultana Sate, a trace of scorn mingling with the wonder in her voice. "You, Ross Kearney!"

"Not for that, if you mean the lives of those two curs," was the low response, as they came to a halt under the shadow cast by a two-story frame building, standing by itself in a neglected yard. "I could have snuffed them out and never turned a hair, myself. But you, Sadia! That's what cuts me so deep, little woman!"

His voice broke with the last words, and few who were acquainted with the cold, "nervy" gambler would have recognized him just then. If such a thing had not been so utterly ridiculous, one might also have taken oath there were tears in his eyes as well as in his tones!

Sultana Sate seemed a little taken aback, despite her usual readiness for anything that might turn up, but she quickly rallied, a smile on her lip and music in her voice as she came closer to the speaker.

"Show me where that gash lies, Ross, and I'll close it—thus!"

Her arms clasped about his neck, drawing his head down until her lips could meet his with a warm, passionate pressure.

Ross Kearney drew her close to his breast, giving full sway to the mad adoration which this beautiful if wicked being inspired in him, permitting her lips to escape his only when her breath was exhausted.

"How much longer, Sadia?" he muttered, huskily, his big eyes seeming to fairly devour that softly flushing face, so womanly despite the disfiguring mustache which it still sported. "Will the end of all this plotting and scheming and double-dealing never come? Are we to go on forever after this fashion?"

"Only a little longer, my pet," was the soft response, as she drew deftly out of his arms with a womanly glance around them, though she knew how slight chance there was of being seen by other eyes, and in reality caring less if such should be the case. "The fruit is dead ripe, and I'm going to shake the tree very soon. Then—then two persons whom I know right well, Ross, will take a trip far away—over the salt water, I reckon! And then—paradise, my Ross!"

She could scarcely have chosen her words better if her wish was to banish all gloom from that handsome countenance. There was nothing in it now but overmastering love. Her crimes were forgotten, and only the glad future remembered.

And yet, while yielding to his rapturous embrace, Sadia Galway was cool and collected enough to steal a furtive glance past to where that ominous glow was brightening and spreading out like a mighty fan, and a short, metallic laugh parted her red lips as there came to their ears the first shrill alarm of "fire! fire!"

"Well meant, but a little too late in the day for effecting aught of good—or evil, rather!" she uttered, slipping from his strong arms and gazing toward the ruddy beacon.

Ross Kearney also turned his gaze in that direction, but his face showed white and hard set under that growing light. Was the love-spell breaking? Was he beginning to see this woman as she really was, not alone as his mad fancies painted her?

Some such thought as this flashed through the busy brain of Sadia Galway, and a frown briefly contracted her brows. But the die was cast, and she boldly made the best of it.

"I can hardly think there is any danger, Ross," she uttered, in low, guarded tones, "but we can't afford to run any blind risks. Go and see what turns up, then come back here to report."

"And if—"

"There must be no if!" flashed Sultana Sate, with a vicious emphasis. "I command you to see that neither of those rascals are rescued with breath enough left to tell their tale!"

"But if they should be?" he persisted.

"You will be there to act as their best friend, Kearney, and—I'll be here, praying that some accident may befall him or them, long before he or they can tell how the fire started! Never let them scatter foul lies abroad about their old pals, pardner!"

Sultana Sate stepped back, motioning for him to hasten away, and in silence Ross Kearney obeyed. But as he strode rapidly toward the now painfully visible glare, his face was dark and ominous.

He was no saint, this gambler. He had grown up amidst crime and criminals, and there was more than one heavy charge recorded against him, for which his life alone could fairly atone. Yet—

He had never been mixed up in a more dastardly crime than that which this dark night had witnessed. If he had taken life, it had been in hot blood, with his own life at stake. Never before had he—

"And she—a woman!" he muttered, almost in a groan as he removed his hat to let the air of early morning play about his fevered brow. "The woman I love better than life! If—if I had only shot the cursed rascals!"

By this time the town was pretty well awakened, and many half-clothed men were running at breakneck speed toward the fire, as is the custom where there are no conveniences for fighting the flames, each one adding his quota to the growing clamor. And not to excite suspicion by dallying by the way, Ross Kearney joined in the race, shouting as loudly as the best, trying to shake off his hideous thoughts.

But when he reached the scene of the conflagration, he subsided, grimly watching the progress of the flames.

The building was a mass of fire from rooftop to foundation, and whatever secrets it held would forever be dead ones! Not a sound came to tell of mortal sacrifices within that growing furnace. And excited though the spectators were, not one of them had aught to say about the possible loss of life, not one mentioned any alarm having been given by either of those two cruelly doomed men!

CHAPTER XXVI.

A BRIDE FOR SALE.

SADIA GALWAY gazed after the tall form of the sport, a smile and a frown battling for supremacy on her face the while.

"He is beginning to grow restive, but I know how to manage the sensitive fellow! And yet—it was rather tough!" with a shiver which she could not altogether conquer, strong though her nerves were, and hardened her heart. "But what else could I do? We can't get along without Brown, and he insisted— Bab!" shrugging her shoulders and turning toward the door of the building. "What matter? 'Twill be all the same a thousand years hence!"

With a latch-key Sultana Sate unfastened the front door, opening it and entering a dimly lighted hall, softly closing the barrier behind her as she uttered a low, soft whistle.

Something like an echo came from the gloom which enveloped the further end of the passageway running along the side of the flight of stairs leading to the upper story, and a rough-clad, slouching fellow came forward under the light of the low-turned lamp, touching his hat with a dirty finger as he muttered:

"I knowed it was you, ma'am, 'fore you give the signal, or I'd 'a' let 'Lizzer—'cordin' to orders, ma'am!"

"How goes it, Trafton? All serene?"

"Quiet as a lamb, ma'am," with a broad grin. "Never even a chirp out o' his head sence the minnit you told me fer to lay him out cold ef he kicked up a bobbery, an'—"

"And tipped you the wink to swallow that order with a grain of salt—precisely," nodded Sultana Sate, with a bright smile that made her faithful satellite grin anew in huge gratification. "All right, Trafton. I'll just run up to my room for a moment, then I'll be back to ask your gentle charge how he likes it as far as he's got!"

Sultana Sate was as good as her word, and when she returned, the only notable alteration lay in her wearing a closely-fitting mask of some soft, black material, which effectually concealed her face from view.

At a nod from her, Trafton unlocked the door before which he was standing guard, throwing it open to announce gruffly:

"The boss, critter!"

"Come in, boss!" coolly cried Allen Bryson, but without rising from the chair in which he reclined; for very sufficient reasons, since he was firmly bound therein, his hands and feet closely tethered, though his eyes and tongue were left unhampered. "Excuse my rising, boss, but high living has gone to my limbs, and I'm forbidden to make any rash exertion."

"Nothing ails your tongue, I judge," laughed Sultana Sate, entering the apartment and closing the door behind her. "No signs of paralysis to be discovered in that quarter, at all events!"

"Which is some slight consolation. Will you take a chair, boss? And if there is anything else you would like, but which you fail to see at once, just call for it, will you, boss?"

Just a trifle taken aback by this unexpectedly cool reception, Sultana Sate sunk into a chair, and then Allen Bryson added:

"Now I have done the honors as well as my sadly crippled condition will admit. And so—what have you done with Miss Brown?"

Despite his forced composure his eyes betrayed his deep anxiety as he asked this question, and Sultana Sate laughed mockingly.

"So there is a joint in your armor, Allen Bryson? Really, I began to wonder if I had not been dreaming all along. I began to ask myself which was the captive, you or me."

"I wanted to show you that I'm ready to talk business from the start, madam," deliberately uttered Bryson, crushing down his lovely fears, knowing well enough that any open ex-

pression of such would but protract his torments.

Sultana Sate gave a feigned start at that title.

"Madam? Are you off your nut, Bryson?"

"I was never more completely sane in my life, Sadia Galway," was the cool retort. "I know who you are. I know why you caused me to be lured to Falcon City. I know that you have set your mind on fingering a goodly portion of my reputed wealth, and—"

"Why not say *all*, Bryson?" with a musical laugh.

"Because a man must live, and you are not utterly heartless, Miss Galway. You would hardly sell a man a bride, and leave him nothing with which to feed and clothe her."

"Feed her on love and sweet breezes, Bryson! But, are you so certain that I mean to furnish you with a bride?"

"I know that such is your intention," was the cool response. "But whether you will succeed depends on circumstances."

"For instance?"

"Time enough to particularize when you have made your offer, Miss Galway," laughed the prisoner, easily. "Excuse me if I seem a bit suspicious, but when you recall the manner of invitation given me, you can hardly blame me for playing the few cards I may hold as carefully as possible."

"Do you know that you are playing with fire just now, Bryson? You impudent varlet!" springing to her feet with viciously clinched hands, showing how sharply his cool demeanor had stung her, so vastly different from what she had anticipated. "Dare you talk to me thus? Do you know that I hold your life in the hollow of my hand? That by uttering a single word—by making a single gesture—I could send you to the grave, after suffering ten thousand deaths?"

"You could, but you will not," was the deliberate response. "And when you have worked off your superfluous steam, Miss Galway, I'll give you my reasons for this firm belief on my part."

It was a perilous venture, but Allen Bryson was in a desperate mood just then, despite his carefully acted coolness. He knew how completely this being held his life in her hands. That gave him no great uneasiness, though life was ordinarily as sweet to him as to any other young and healthy man; but all thought for himself was forgotten in his fear for the woman of his love, Essie Brown.

He had been thinking hard and fast ever since his captors left him alone in that room, and this was the outcome of his reflections. He knew that prayers and pleadings would be worse than thrown away upon criminals who could commit such a dastardly series of outrages. They would not only scoff at his arguments, but would take still further advantage of his weakness. And so, he resolved to face them boldly, and to treat the whole affair as a simple matter of bargain and sale.

For a few minutes his very life hung in the balance, for Sultana Sate was almost maddened by what she at once fancied was a portent of defeat in her carefully-laid plans. But Bryson calmly waited until her feminine passion exhausted itself, a cold smile playing about his firm lips, naught of his real anxiety permitted to show itself.

Even while her fury seemed at its height, Sultana Sate stopped abruptly, gazing into his face for a single breath, then breaking into a peal of hearty laughter as she dropped back into her chair.

"Do you know, Bryson, what a curious fancy flashed into my brain just this instant?" she asked, as soon as she could control her tongue.

"I expect to learn, seeing it occurred to a lady," nodding grimly.

"And you shall, for it's too good to keep secret. I just happened to think that I was plotting to give a mighty good man to a very weak girl, and then—why shouldn't I keep both fortune and man?"

"There was once a dog with a bone in his mouth, who chanced to look down at his reflection in the brook which he was just crossing, and—you catch on? Then I needn't finish my second-hand fable," the prisoner uttered, with a peculiar smile at her quick start. "There is only one woman in this world for me, and her name is Essie Brown."

"You are a bold man to speak so bluntly to another woman, Allen Bryson!" sharply uttered Sultana Sate, her eyes shining vividly through the twin holes in her mask.

"Because I know that you want my money, not my hand or heart, Miss Galway," then adding in a more eager tone: "This being the case, why waste further time in beating about the bush? Why not come to terms at once? Why not make known your ultimatum, leaving me to accept or reject it without further parley?"

"That might be done, too!" with still harder tones. "The girl is safe in wind and limb so far, but how long she remains so will depend mainly upon yourself. Of this make sure: Essie Brown will be your lawfully wedded wife by this hour to-morrow, or she will be the bride of grim death!"

"Better the last than sacrificed to that cow-

ardly cur from whose clutches I rescued her!" flashed Bryson, then hurriedly adding: "You are a woman; as such I tell you this: name your own price for Essie Brown, and if she will ratify the bargain, I'll pay it if it strips me of every dollar I own in the world. If she refuses, or if you try to play double on either of us, never a red cent shall you finger, by fair means or by foul."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A TERRIBLE TEMPTATION.

"By which I am to understand?"

"Simply this, Miss Galway," was the deliberate response. "That I am willing to sacrifice my fortune to insure the safety and freedom of Miss Brown, and knowing she really loves me, I am ready to accept your share in making her my wife, since you seem to make an especial point of it. But—neither threats nor promises can induce me to give you a single dollar until I am positive there is no further crooked work behind."

Sultana Sate laughed hardly, then sneered:

"Do you carry all your wealth about you, Bryson?"

"Unfortunately for you, Miss Galway, I do not."

"Then you can readily see that there *must* be a certain degree of confidence on either side; but we can arrange all the minor preliminaries after the greater obstacles are overcome."

Sultana Sate arose from her chair and turned toward the door, but turned quickly, laughing softly, mockingly as she caught the anxious, wistful look which unconsciously showed itself in the face of her captive the instant he felt himself free from those watchful eyes.

"I am going to call on your adorable divinity, Allen," the woman uttered, pausing with her hand on the knob. "Have you no message to send her? Not one hope, a single kiss, for instance?"

That was the last feather, and despite his stern resolve to keep strict control of his tongue and temper, Bryson broke forth with:

"Neither one nor the other from *your* lips, you fiend! I'd sooner choose a poison serpent as a love messenger!"

Sultana Sate laughed lightly, exulting in this explosion, feeling far more confident now of winning her ends than she had at any time since that interview began. His cool nerve could be unsettled, and the knowledge might be worth much in time.

"Just as you say, Bryson. I'm not spoiling for the reality when the shadow will answer every purpose. It will be but one little lie more, and I doubt if Essie can detect the fraud, even if I risk the immaculate purity of my fair face!"

Without waiting for further speech, Sultana Sate opened the door and passed out, pausing on the further side only long enough to speak to Trafton, the man on guard:

"I've been stirring the animal up a bit, Trafton, and he may try to test his lungs if nothing is done. Just gag him, will you?"

"Bet I will, ma'am!"

"Handle him as though you wore velvet gloves, Trafton," the woman added as she turned toward the foot of the flight. "He's worth a tidy mint of money, and undamaged goods require heap less lying to get rid of. Just seal his lips as gently as possible."

Knowing that she could place implicit trust in the guard, Sultana Sate took no further precautions, but rapidly ascended to the upper story, vanishing within her own chamber, devoting a few minutes to changing her masculine garb for garments better befitting her real sex.

This accomplished, she left her chamber for another, passing through a division door, thus obviating the necessity of going through the hall or passage outside.

The chamber was dark, though a faint light came in through the window, despite its curtain of plain white stuff, and Sultana Sate paused to strike a match and light a lamp which stood on an old-fashioned bureau.

As she did this, the sound of muffled sobbings ceased, and with a faint creaking of rusty springs, a feminine figure rose partly up in bed, pushing back her tangled masses of hair, gazing half-frightened, half-indignantly upon the intruder.

The face and figure were those of Essie Brown, and this was the first fair glimpse she had had of the other's face since watching her leave the old building in company with Cale Dipson. She had swooned outright when her lover was so brutally assailed, worn out in mind and body by all she had recently undergone, and though she had not long remained insensible, when her senses fairly returned, she found herself in this chamber, a prisoner.

"It is you, Sadia Galway?" she uttered, her voice far from steady, but with undisguised hatred and scorn flashing from her eyes. "I knew you must be at the bottom of this vile outrage!"

"I had ought to be ashamed of myself, hadn't I, sister?" laughed Sultana Sate, sinking into a chair, looking more like an angel than a fiend, thanks to her changed garb, the absence of that false mustache and the slight

pallor born of fatigue and hard thinking. "And yet, you ought to be the last one to fault me, Essie. Only for me, you would not have secured such a delicious interview with your ardent lover."

She laughed afresh at the start which Essie Brown gave at this unexpected remark, but coolly added:

"You little idiot! haven't you seen through it all even yet? Did we play it so fine, Rcass and I? Then—let me tell you, little cat!"

"I wanted you to overhear every word we uttered to-night in the old house, and to make certain our time was not wasted. I invented that flimsy excuse for paying your sleeping-prison two visits. If you had really been asleep, I meant to awaken you, as by accident; but I saw there was no necessity for this. Though, I'm free to admit that you played your part to perfection; and if I hadn't been looking for just such a trick, I might have been deceived."

"I do not believe it!" faltered Essie, but her actions belied her words, for her head bowed and she hid her face between her hands.

"You are not wholly above fibbing, little cat, and I'm glad of it," mocked the woman chief, her eyes glowing wickedly as she watched her helpless prey. "It puts me more at ease, for I'm too wicked myself to talk freely with a saint. And so—let me complete my proof, Essie!"

"Do you guess now why I made my second visit to your room? To be doubly sure you should learn how carelessly I forgot to relock your prison door! And your father, the gentle and obedient Benjamin, played drunk simply because I wanted you to lose little time in running away to find your lover!"

Essie uttered a faint groan of bitter despair, more shaken by this proof of her enemies' satanic cunning than by all else. For it showed her how thoroughly their evil schemes were planned, and how thoroughly they were resolved to carry them out to the bitter end.

"Need I say more, little cat?" mocked Sultana Sate, rightly interpreting this hopeless sound. "Need I tell you how your lover was led into your arms, though we came so near being foiled by that hot-headed lover of yours, Cale Dipson! Need I tell you that, from the first to last, you cooing turtle-doves were safely within the hollow of our hands?"

There was no response. Essie even stifled her sobs, lying as if wholly overcome on the bed, with her face hidden from view. But Sultana Sate knew that she was conscious. She could detect a painful, spasmodic shiver at intervals, and pitilessly continued:

"Those hands would have closed upon you two sooner than they did, little cat, only I was waiting and watching for you to fairly yield to that persuasive tongue. How you held out so long, so heroically as you did, passes my comprehension! For—that is a gay persuasive tongue of his, and lips so sweet—do you know, Essie, I came very near forgetting that Allen sent you his love and a score of kisses! Shall I deliver the latter, dear?"

She laughed merrily as her victim started up in bed with a short indignant exclamation, her face flushed, her eyes all aglow.

"Only half a lie, little cat," with a mocking bow, having gained her ends. "I have just come from Bryson. I offered to carry you as many kisses as he cared to place in my care, but he politely hinted that he would see me further, first!"

"I knew you were lying," with forced composure. "Allen Bryson is a gentleman. You are—a shameless hussy!"

"And sole arbiter of your fate and his, bear in mind, little cat," smiling blandly at the uncomplimentary epithet. "I made him understand as much before I came up-stairs to argue with you. If you are as cool and sensible as I found your lover, we'll have all arranged to perfection before another day dies out."

She paused as though to give Essie a chance to speak, but not a word escaped those paling lips. Her eyes were closed, she seemed summoning all her strength to withstand the terrible temptation which instinct warned her was just ahead.

"I found Allen Bryson far easier to deal with than I had been led to expect, Essie," her tones growing more gentle, less irritating. "I counted on having a hard fight with him before gaining victory, but when I fairly opened my battery, he came down like a little man! And—Essie, you're trying to turn your back on as good and true and noble a gentleman as ever the sun shone upon!"

"He cares nothing for himself, in comparison with your safety. He boldly defied my power until convinced that your life hung on his giving way. Even then he declared that he would consent to my terms, only on receiving your full and free consent to the marriage."

"I promised him this, Essie—nay," with a cold swiftness as the poor girl made a negative gesture, "hear me out before you utter words which you shall be forced to swallow again. I gave him the pledge he asked, knowing that while I held him captive I could force you to back up my words, even though you were twice as crazy as you have tried to make out of late."

"But let that point rest for the time being; forever, if you will allow, Essie, for I'll call it up for use only when all milder means fail me. Until then—if ever the emergency is to arise—listen, my dear, and try to clear that sorely muddled brain of yours.

"I, too, am a woman, Essie Brown. I, too, have loved and been loved in return. But—as Heaven hears me now, Essie! I never knew what it was or is to be so passionately, so dearly, so entirely adored as you are by Allen Bryson! Bah!" with a short laugh of mingled anger and disgust at the sound which escaped those poor lips. "You moan and sigh, when you should be laughing with pure joy and warmest love!

"You have been clasped in his arms time and again within the last few hours, Essie Brown. You have received and you have returned his ardent kisses. I know, for I saw and heard!

"I offer you all these, for life, little cat! I offer you your liberty, checked only by the silken chains of matrimony. I offer you a true and brave gentleman for your life-guardian. I add to all this, his life and liberty, asking only a moiety of his too superfluous wealth as full payment for my time and trouble.

"Pause long enough to weigh all this, Essie Brown. Consider well before you refuse what I now offer you, remembering that just as I have the power to grant you so much, just so have I the means of brushing all this aside, to give place to—shall I draw the contrasting picture?"

There was no immediate response to this coldly uttered yet graphically drawn picture of bliss. Essie bowed her head lower, hiding her face, but unable to conceal her terrible emotions as well.

It was truly a terrible temptation, even though it came from such an evil source. She realized it all so keenly! She seemed to hear anew the earnest pleadings of the man who loved her so passionately, and her aching heart itself was seconding the cunning efforts of Sultana Sate.

For a single breath she felt herself yielding—felt her love prevailing over all else. But then, just as she was on the point of sobbing that all else was as naught in comparison with his dear life, a blood-red hand seemed to rise before her brain and sternly wave her back, then pointing to an unfilled grave lying between herself and her radiant lover!

"I cannot—I will not!" she shrieked, falling back on the bed in a deathlike swoon.

CHAPTER XXVIII. A LIE WELL TOLD.

THE sun was fairly above the horizon when Ross Kearney turned away from the glowing heap of ruins, satisfied that all was going well, even though already there were flying rumors as to the probable loss of life. But that was simply in accordance with their own plans, since all seemed agreed that the cremated person could be none other than Ben Brown, the owner of the destroyed building.

He took no part in the eager surmises, and did not even wait to ascertain if there was any likelihood of a search being made among the debris as soon as the ruins should cool sufficiently. He was heartily sick of it all, and eager to finish his part in the game.

He hastened at once to the building in front of which he had parted from Sultana Sate, and receiving ready admittance, briefly made his report to that woman.

She listened in silence, keenly if covertly watching his face the while, frowning just a trifle as she read his poorly-concealed remorse. But she was too wise to openly comment upon this, or to attempt removing what she really felt were idiotic scruples. Time would do all that with greater safety, she reflected.

In return she told him how far she had proceeded with their well-prepared plans, laughing in glee as she described the unique manner in which she had been received by Allen Bryson, but frowning blackly when she came to report her complete failure with Essie Brown.

"You know why she holds out, Ross, and unless we can make her believe that her father is fairly out of the way, she'll die before yielding to our wishes, let the penalty be what it may!"

"Will his supposed death remove her scruples?" slowly asked the gambler. "The deed itself will still remain, remember!"

"It's our only hope, counting her in," with a frown that destroyed much of her beauty while it lasted. "She's been shaken pretty roughly, and maybe we can't bamboozle the little cat far enough to pull us through. If not—well, the trial first, then the alternative!"

"Can't we squeeze a pile from him without the ceremony, think?"

"Hardly, unless I've summed him up wrong. He wants Essie, and nothing less will content him. And—nothing less will satisfy me!" with strong emphasis. "It's the master-stroke of my life, Ross, and I'll win as I first plotted, or I'll go down in the crash!"

"Better half a loaf than no bread, Sadia."

"I want the whole bakeshop, and nothing less will content my appetite, Ross!" with glowing eyes.

"I'm growing sick and disgusted with it all, Sadia."

"Including me, Ross Kearney?"

"You know better than that, little woman," he murmured, catching her to his bosom and raining hot kisses over her flushed face. "But I would rather sweep out a keno-room for a living than to share one dollar of this money, gained by your wading so deep in filth! Sadia, love, give it up, I beg of you, for my sake!"

"I'd sooner give you up, Ross Kearney!" she flashed, tearing herself from his embrace and lifting her clinched hand as though she longed to dash it into his ghastly pale face.

For a moment Ross Kearney gazed steadily into her face, then turned away as though to leave the house without a word more. Only to be checked by her eager grasp, to turn and meet her hot kisses before she brokenly begged his pardon for her temporary madness.

"I didn't know what I was saying, love," she murmured, deftly drawing one of his arms about her waist, leaning against his rapidly throbbing heart. "I've lost so much rest, and had such troublesome tangles to smooth out, that I'm more than half crazy. Will you not forgive—and forget, dearest?"

Even before his answer came, she knew the victory was won. In her hands he was as wax.

Sultana Sate devoted a few minutes to covering up her slip, and in the end received his pledge to substantiate any story which she might see fit to tell Essie as to the supposed fate of her father. And then she bade him wait where he was, while she ran up to break the terrible tidings to her helpless victim.

"If she swallows it after the fashion I hope, Ross, I'll not call you," laughed the heartless schemer, pausing on the threshold. "If not, I'll whistle, and you can appear to bear me out as we've arranged. You comprehend, my grave old baby?"

Ross Kearney bowed assent, not caring to trust his tongue too far just then. Crime-stained though his life had been, he never before felt nearly so contemptibly guilty as now! And yet—he knew that he would not, even if he could, break the chains which held him a slave.

Once again Essie Brown rose from her bed at the entrance of her pitiless captor, pale, worn, showing in face and eyes how much she had suffered of late. But aside from this, her bearing was firmer, stronger than at any time since her recapture in company with her lover.

She felt that the worst was past, now, so far as she herself was concerned. She had already endured all mortal could bear and still continue to live. That temptation had been resisted, and even Sultana Sate could not revive it in equal force.

So the poor girl believed, until she caught sight of that face, so grave, so troubled, so different from what she anticipated on hearing the door of her chamber open. What new trap was this fiend in human guise about to spring? What fresh torture had her Satanic ingenuity devised?

"Essie—my poor child, how can I tell you?" brokenly murmured Sultana Sate, sinking into the one chair afforded by the chamber, covering her face with her hands. "You will blame me, and yet—as high heaven hears me! I never thought such a terrible thing could happen!"

"Allen—my love!" panted Essie, revealing the intensity of her passion by that very fear. "He is dead! You have murdered him!"

Sultana Sate shook her head in negation, keeping her face hidden until she could thoroughly blot the triumphant smile from her features, then gravely, sadly meeting that half-frenzied look of inquiry.

"Allen Bryson is well, Essie, and begs to see you at your earliest convenience. But I didn't mean to speak of him just now. I meant—how can I tell you, poor girl?" her voice quivering, tears dimming her dark eyes.

"I can bear anything else, I believe," slowly uttered Essie, even yet doubting the truth of this assertion.

"Even—Essie, you know how terribly Caleb Dipson tyrannized over your poor father? You know—you at least suspect why he held such power?"

"I know. It has been my awful curse ever since I learned of it."

"Well, last night Caleb Dipson was captured, just after he had tried his best to ruin our plans, by attempting to murder your lover, Essie. He did more; he introduced a detective into our ranks, meaning to sell us to the law! But we captured him, and I turned him over to your father for safe keeping, never dreaming, so help me Heaven! that anything so horrible would or could occur!"

With a choking groan Essie covered her face, shrinking from that hypocritical actress as she faintly murmured:

"He—killed him! Father mur—"

"Murder?" echoed Sultana Sate, in admirably counterfeited surprise. "Surely not murder, Essie? Nay, you are too hard, poor child. At the very worst it could not be called more than a terrible accident. You know how hard Caleb could be, and—doubtless they became engaged in a quarrel, which ended somehow in breaking or overturning the lamp, and—my poor child!" breaking off and hiding her face once more.

Essie gave a start, uttering a low cry as she

glanced out of the window, near the foot of her bed. She remembered having noticed a red glow through the curtain, and quickly divined its purport now.

"You mean—poor father was—" she panted, faintly.

"The house was burned, and there is some talk about cries for help having been heard before—"

"Dead—burned to death! And he—God have mercy upon him!"

Sultana Sate stifled a heartless laugh as she covertly watched her tortured victim, now bowed down by a fresh weight of sorrow, though she knew how evil, how sinful, how thoroughly bad that father had been for years gone by.

Still, he was her father.

For a short time Sultana Sate kept silence, reflecting whether or no she had better risk another shrewd stroke so soon. She felt that it might work more evil than good, but in the end she crept to the bedside and bending, whispered softly into Essie's ear:

"After all, dear, is it not better thus? There is no barrier now! There is nothing standing between you and Allen Bryson; between you and perfect happiness as the bride of your gallant lover, Essie!"

Her only answer was a faint moan, but she smiled as she stole away.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BRANDS PLUCKED FROM THE BURNING.

IT may be remembered that the rescue and flight of Caleb Dipson by and in company with Solemn Saul Sunday, was precipitated by their catching sounds which seemingly indicated the return of Gabriel Gunn, the self-styled Grizzly from Ginseng.

So far they were correct, for they had hardly passed through the fringe of bushes surrounding the little rocky amphitheater, when Gabe Gunn returned, crouching low and keeping them in view through all their hasty flight.

But there was little of the wild, fierce, maniacal fury such as he had exhibited shortly before fleeing from his bound captive, and he had to all seeming entirely recovered his self-control.

He followed Solemn Saul and Cale Dipson to the spot where the gaunt thimble-rigger made his final proposition to his new ally, and there was a hard, grim triumph in his guarded laugh as he beheld the two men turning away toward Falcon City.

Still keeping his actions so well covered that even had the two men been twice as suspicious, and doubly as cautious in their actions, they would hardly have discovered his cunning es-pial, Gabe Gunn dogged them to the door of the house within which Sultana Sate was lying in wait for the traitor member of her band.

The door had hardly closed behind the twain before the Grizzly from Ginseng crept silently up to the building, seeking for a loophole through which he might see and hear all that transpired; but with a most disgusting lack of success.

He could see nothing. He could hear only enough to assure himself that the newly formed partnership had already led its members into serious trouble. That was all. He had no means of ascertaining just how pressing was the danger.

"It can't be bad enough for that, or I'd hear the signal!" he muttered beneath his breath, at length.

He was still prowling about the building, examining its weak points and trying to prepare himself for aught that might happen, when a tiny ray of light flashed directly into his eyes as he crouched at the rear of the old house, alarmed by a curious sound within its walls.

Gabe Gunn paused only long enough to satisfy himself that this was not an optical illusion, then cautiously investigated the matter.

The ray of light came through a narrow crack between two rough boards, parallel and nearly even with the ground. And though he could not catch a glimpse of the speakers through this crack, he could catch their voices and even distinguish their words.

Using his knife with all possible caution, Gabe Gunn soon had the crack enlarged sufficiently to enable him to peer through at Ben Brown and his miserable captive, Caleb Dipson. And then he knew, what he had only suspected, that serious trouble had befallen both the guided and the guide.

Gabe Gunn listened with eager interest to all that passed between the two men, up to the point where Cale Dipson burst forth with his frantic scream for help. He saw him gagged, and heard Ben Brown still further glut his long delayed revenge by describing the horrible fate which was in store for his enemy.

But when the flaxen-haired ruffian dragged Dipson to a different part of the cellar, ferociously laughing at his own grim jest, the spy caught his breath sharply and withdrew his eye from the tiny aperture.

Even yet he could hardly credit the evidence of his own senses. Murderer though he stood self-confessed, Ben Brown surely would not set fire to the place while it contained at least two helpless inmates!

"If so—good-by, Caleb!" muttered Gunn, as

he moved silently away from the cellar window, to pause abruptly and crouch lower as his keen eyes caught sight of a dark figure emerging from a rear door, then pass rapidly away through the shadows.

This was the owner of those hairy paws, whose deft *garrote* so completely surprised the gaunt thimble-rigger. His work accomplished, Jack Ketch, to give him the grim title bestowed upon him for the nonce by Sultana Sate, was seeking seclusion and safety together.

Gabe Gunn only suspected something of this, for before he had time to ponder it well, he caught the first signal uttered by Sultana Sate as she turned to leave Saul Sunday to his impending doom.

He crept around the corner, in time to catch part of the impatient greeting as Sadia Galway received Ben Brown, and knowing that there was no time to lose, he hurried back to that rear door, opening it and groping his way along the narrow passage to the room where Solemn Saul stood helpless, blinded, bound, a choking noose about his throat!

Guided by the dim light which filtered through the warped door, Gabe Gunn reached the room and entered, taking in that thrilling sight at a single glance, then springing swiftly across to the side of the rigidly erect thimble-rigger, muttering:

"Praise the Lord! I'm not too late, pardner!"

A single sweep of his keen blade severed the rope, and almost as quickly the other thongs were removed, Solemn Saul drawing a long breath of relief as he uttered:

"A regular picnic, wasn't it?"

"I knew it was too risky, but you would have it that way, Saul!"

"I'm wiser now, and I'd hardly try the same racket over again," with a hard laugh, cut short by a quick quiver of his sensitive nostrils. "What's up, old fellow? The room is filling—Thunder and Mars! They haven't fired the building?"

"They just have," with a short, grim laugh. "That's what brought me in such a hurry. Didn't dare wait for the regular—"

"And Dipson? What of him?"

"Beginning to scorch, if no worse, but that's no more—"

He left the sentence incomplete, for Saul Sunday leaped to the table and caught up the lamp, rushing with it in his hand to the door, through which he had seen Ben Brown carry his blanket-bed victim.

"Come, man!" he gratingly uttered, flashing back an angry glance at the irresolute mountaineer as he gained the door. "We've got to save that rascal, or—"

"For the rope, if it isn't too late already!" growled the Grizzly from Ginseng, but following the lead of the thimble-rigger.

Saul Sunday quickly discovered the trap-door by means of which access was had to the cellar, and flinging it open, he staggered back for an instant as a mass of hot smoke burst upward.

"Too late!" hoarsely uttered Gabe Gunn, springing forward with hands extended to grasp and restrain the wanderer. "You'll only lose your own life without—"

His speech ended in something like a groan of angry despair, for Saul Sunday, placing the lamp near the opening, sprang recklessly down through the trap, determined to rescue Caleb Dipson from death, or to share his fate!

And close upon his heels followed Gabe Gunn, though there was a fierce, angry laugh upon his lips as he did so.

"Two lives for one, and that one— Steady, pard!"

The opening of the trap-door had drawn out a vast share of the collected smoke, and at the same time quickened the flames below. This double change lighted up the cellar fairly well, and as Gabe Gunn entered in turn, he saw Saul Sunday just in the act of lifting a prostrate figure in his arms.

Limp, lifeless, dead, to all appearance; but there was no time to be wasted in examination now. Already the hot flames were beginning to gnaw through the flooring, and many minutes could not elapse before the increasing glow must arouse alarm and attract curious eyes.

Gabe Gunn saw that Solemn Saul was equal to the task assumed, and with rare coolness in such an emergency he at once beat a retreat up through the trap-door, standing ready to relieve his comrade of that limp burden the instant his head and shoulders should appear.

The smoke was growing dangerously thick, though there was no actual danger from the flames, as yet. Breathing was difficult, and speaking altogether out of the question while near that opening, through which the smoke and heat rushed with suffocating violence.

Gabe Gunn caught Caleb Dipson by the shoulders, dragging him into the room like a bundle of rags, swinging him across his broad shoulders as he watched to make sure Saul Sunday effected his escape. Assured on that score, he gripped Sunday by a wrist and hurried away from the trap-door, making for the outer air by means of the rear door.

"So far, good!" panted Solemn Saul, drawing his lungs full of pure air as they stood under

the starlight once more. "Now—if those imps of Satan are not on the lookout for us!"

"Whether they are or not, we can't stop here much longer!" grimly retorted Gabe Gunn. "Look at the growing light! The whole town'll be out of bed in ten minutes more! Shall we wait for them, or—"

"Pull out with our game, just as quick as the law allows!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE DEVIL A MONK WOULD BE.

SAUL SUNDAY led the way, hastening for the nearest cover, luckily only a short distance off, followed closely by Gabe Gunn, bending under his limp and seemingly lifeless burden.

The cover was reached without a sound to indicate their discovery from any quarter, and Solemn Saul laughed grimly as he paused long enough to glance keenly about them, muttering:

"I reckon they thought it safer to be at a distance when the fire-bells should ring forth the wild alarm. And—well, we seemed safe enough, in all conscience!"

"What next?" muttered Gabe Gunn, shifting uneasily under his burden. "You're running the old machine, but I don't care to play pack-mule for such filthy carrion longer than is absolutely necessary."

"Like a toad, I reckon he bears a mighty precious jewel in his head, pardner," chuckled the thimble-rigger, moving away from the still perilous location. "When your muscles go back on you, just shift the load onto my shoulders."

An inarticulate growl was the only response, and then they rapidly retreated from the spot, making no pause of note until the town was fairly behind them, and safety fairly within their grasp.

"There she comes, at last!" laughed Saul, as the wild yell of "fire!" finally broke forth upon the night. "None too soon, either, if they want to enjoy the bonfire! I began to think the old shell would have all its glory to itself, but—well, what o' the night, watchman?"

Gabe Gunn had lowered his burden to the ground, removing the gag from those bleeding lips, though leaving the bonds still in place upon Dipson's limbs.

"He's living, safe enough," was the gruff response. "I don't know as he has so much to thank you for, however. He was past feeling or fearing, down yonder, and a few moments more would have closed his account for this world. Now—is it rope or life stripes, Saul?"

"That depends," with a grim nod. "Unless he's made of sterner stuff than I think, I've got a notion that Caleb will squeal without much coaxing. And if he tells all he knows, even you'll hardly regret the trouble we've taken in plucking him, a brand from the burning."

Although at a considerable distance from the fire itself, owing to their being upon a hillside, comparatively free from undergrowth, Saul Sunday deemed it too risky to maintain their present position, lest the ruddy glare from the blazing building betray them to the eyes of some of the hurriedly gathering citizens.

As a hint to this effect, Gabe Gunn grasped the shoulders of Caleb Dipson, Saul taking his other extremity, and together they bore their prize further into the hills, only pausing when the wretch gave signs of recovering his senses.

The fire was lost to view now, though its bright glare considerably lightened the gloom which would have enveloped their present retreat. Feeling safe from intrusion, Saul Sunday fell to work restoring Caleb Dipson to full consciousness.

"How shall it be, Sunday?" asked Gunn, guardedly. "Will we keep to the same old rut, so far as he is concerned? Shall it be seraph and master, or will we show forth in our real colors?"

Sunday hesitated for a moment, then replied: "I can tell better after I see the sort of mood he opens his eyes in, pardner. Better take a rest under cover, until I test the critter."

Shrugging his shoulders, but without other protest or argument, Gabe Gunn complied, leaving Saul Sunday alone with the now groaning, shivering wretch. And though he possessed no restoratives, in the common acceptance of that term, the gaunt thimble-rigger quickly managed to revive Dipson sufficiently to comprehend the all-joyful fact of his being alive and in comparative freedom, cutting his bonds and calling his attention to this fact.

It would be no agreeable task to record the broken words, the impiously fawning sobs and prayers and moans of thanksgiving with which the cowardly wretch greeted his rescuer. And though he had an important end to attain through this wretch, Saul Sunday could hardly endure his thanks, could scarcely refrain from striking his bleeding lips in utter scorn.

He saw that whatever nerve, so-called, Caleb Dipson ever possessed, it had been completely shattered by the tortures he had endured before insensibility came to relieve him. The knowledge that he was doomed by a pitiless enemy to lie and slowly roast to death, had completely broken him down.

"Durn your thanks, critter!" bluntly interposed Solemn Saul, cutting short his husky protestations of eternal gratitude. "Ef them was the only pay I lotted on gittin' out o' ye, it's mighty cl'ar I'd b'in from runnin' the resk I did! Fer I only got out o' the trap ye led me into, by the skin o' my teeth! What made ye do it, crit er? What set ye on to crack them p'izen critters up as crooks o' the crookedest kind?"

With no little difficulty Caleb Dipson gathered his dizzy senses sufficiently to comprehend the drift of this angry arraignment, but as soon as he fairly comprehended what Solemn Saul was driving at, he said:

"It was no trap. I told you true. They were crooks, and I'll take my oath to that effect before any court in the land!"

"You will? Then—just play I'm the court, judge, jury, sheriff an' all the rest, critter," grimly laughed the thimble-rigger. "Play you was in the witness-box, duly sworn and all that way. Play you was told to 'fess all you knowed about that same gang an' tba'r secret doin's. Play you was to be set free or pinned tight, 'cordin' as you talked straight, an' hed 'nough fer to pay the court fer all its trouble. Play that, pardner, an' mebbe it'll save me the trouble o' totin' you back down yender, to turn ye over to that pritty woman in men's duds!"

Dipson cried out in horror at the mere suggestion, and it was some little time before he could collect his nerves sufficiently to utter a connected sentence. But in the end he did so, and guided by the cunning hints of the thimble-rigger, he made a full and complete confession.

To follow his remarks *in extenso* would be to repeat much that has already found record in these pages, thus occupying space which can be used to better advantage.

He told Saul Sunday of the bold schemes which Sultana Sate and Ross Kearney had concocted for the purpose of robbing Allen Bryson of his wealth, in whole or in part, according to the chances when their game neared an end.

If possible Essie Brown was to be forced to marry Bryson, after such a fashion as would not leave the slightest shadow of a doubt as to the perfect legality of the ceremony. This done, and Bryson forced to sign a will leaving all his property to his wife, Essie Bryson, he was to be killed, the girl blinded to the truth and then turned over to him, Caleb Dipson, to be kept out of the way of the schemers. Sultana Sate was to assume the part of the newly-made widow, and by virtue of the will, claim and receive the ill-gotten wealth.

Such, in brief, was the foul plot laid bare by that trembling, craven wretch, and it was only by forcibly holding both hands behind his back that Solemn Saul refrained from striking him as he confessed.

But he had still more to glean, and closely questioned Dipson as to the different members of the evil gang, their crimes and all, never giving over until his purpose was fairly won.

"A mighty sweet-scented outfit you've bin trainin' with, I don't think, Cale Dipson!" exclaimed Solemn Saul, with a long breath as the miserable wretch ceased speaking as though he had told all.

"I know—I never realized it so completely as I do now!" he mumbled, shivering like a leaf. "I had time for thinking, down in that horrible pit! I had time—my God! too much time for thought!"

"And you've clean 'pented, o' course?" grinned Solemn Saul. "You won't never sin no more? You'll turn monk, mebbe? I wouldn't wonder!"

"I'll live straight from this hour on!" with more energy than he had as yet exhibited. "All I ask is a fair chance to make amends for my past crimes. And to prove it, I'll swear against those pitiless demons the first chance I get! I'll tell everything, even to—"

Saul Sunday caught at the opening thus unwittingly offered, with an affectation of grim delight on face and in voice:

"I knowed it, critter! I knowed I'd ketch ye trippin' ef I'd wait an' lay low long enough! Think ye could fool your Uncle Fuller, eh? Picked out what ye wanted to tell, an' kep' back all the rest?"

"I swear—"

"An' I'll kick ye ef you try to cuss at me, critter!" gruffly retorted the thimble-rigger. "Hold yer hush, an' thank your lucky stars that I don't tote ye down thar to give back into the grip o' Ben Brown fer tryin' to play dirt all over the gentleman as saved your worthless life at the resk o' his own! Or—why wouldn't I?" with a harsh, exultant laugh at the seemingly happy thought. "It'd make me solid with my seraph, an'— Hellow, Gabe Gunn!"

Instantly the Grizzly stepped forth, and with a choking cry of terror, the nerve-shattered wretch swooned away.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN OBSTINATE MATCHMAKER.

SULTANA SATE left Essie Brown to herself for some considerable time after communicating to her the tidings of her father's death by cremation in their old house, flattering herself that the

poor girl would surely yield to the temptation contained in her parting words.

"The little idiot is only longing for a decent chance to drop into his arms, despite all her mock-heroic nonsense," the feminine schemer declared to Ross Kearney as she rejoined him in the lower story. "I sowed the seed, and I'll begin to reap the harvest before the sun goes down."

But she was fated to change her opinion ere long, and to realize that, even with both parties safely in her hands, the battle was still far from being won.

It was a painful, trying scene for poor Essie, in which she gave Sadia Galway her final decision, but the maiden remained firm to the last, despite the fierce threats and angry raging of her captress.

Even though Benjamin Brown was dead, as she saw no good cause for doubting, the barrier still remained between herself and Allen Bryson.

"Do you fully realize what that means, little fool?" harshly cried Sultana Sate. "It means that I'll crush your will by such exquisite torments as never a red Indian ever dreamt of. It means that I'll wring tears of blood from your heart by forcing you to look on while we rack Allen Bryson worse than the inquisitors of old. And with each groan, each shiver and moan of agony, I'll laugh in your ears and remind you that though our hands apply the torments, your lips pronounced his doom!"

Much more the enraged plotter uttered in this vein, hoping still to win the victory thus, because Essie sobbed and moaned and piteously pleaded with her for mercy; not for herself, but for the man of her love. But weak and broken down though she appeared to the outward eye, Essie remained steadfast to her desperate resolution to never yield to threats, even as she resisted the burning pleadings of her own great love.

Covering her retreat as best she could by a pretext of granting Essie another spell for reflection, Sadia Galway returned once more to the lower story, shutting herself up in the darkened front room, pondering moodily over this unexpected balk.

Could she get along without the full and free consent of this puritanical little idiot? Could she drug her, and thus force her to go through the ceremony without too dangerously betraying her hand?

"If Bryson was a bit more of a rascal!" she frowned, clenching her hands until their joints cracked from the pressure. "But he'd be the first one to kick. He'd jump the track right then and there, taking his death rather than play even a passive fraud on the girl!"

Besides this, there was another risk to be taken into consideration before deciding on the use of drugs.

As Sultana Sate told Ross Kearney, she would be content with nothing less than the entire fortune now owned by Allen Bryson. And before she could enter into possession of that, she must be armed to the teeth, without a flaw or weak joint in her armor.

"There must be nothing to break the force of the evidence, and no suspicious witnesses, least of all to the legal part of the trick," she decided, moodily. "The squire would kick at anything crooked, and at the very best there will be enough to make him keep his eyes mighty wide open for aught of fraud. No—drugs won't serve!"

She abandoned that idea, having proven it wholly untenable under the peculiar circumstances. She racked her brain for another and better expedient, but with poor success. Despite her efforts to keep clear of it, her brain would turn back to an idea which had more than once been discarded, half-reluctantly, half-derisively.

Was it clearly impossible for her to play the part of bride?

"I couldn't pass myself off on Bryson as Essie, of course," she muttered, with a frowning smile. "And yet—is there no way to throw dust into his eyes? No 'changing babies,' as it were?"

Though it had so often occurred to her as a possible resource in case all other means should fail, Sadia Galway had not as yet clearly solved the puzzle.

"If he wasn't so infernally cool and clear-brained, I could work in the drug racket. I could dose Essie until she would be as wax in my hands, and go through the farce like an automaton. Then—there might be a cunning shifting of characters, and Allen Bryson make Sadia his dearly beloved wife instead of Essie!"

Such, from the first, had been her most favored plan, both because it would do away with the necessity of removing, temporarily or forever, the girl whom she had used as a cat's-paw, and because it would lend the whole game a neater and more dramatic finish. But in shaping her plans she had not allowed enough for the cool nerve and iron will of Allen Bryson.

Still, it might be done that way.

Acting on the impulse of the moment, Sadia Galway rose from her meditations and at once sought an interview with Bryson.

There was no guard at his door now, for she

felt no fears of her prisoner attempting an escape, much less of his trying to excite curiosity by lifting his voice in an aimless endeavor to secure help. As long as he felt convinced that Essie Brown was beneath the same roof, and suffering no actual injury, he would be quiet and patient as might be expected or wished.

Becoming satisfied on this point, Sultana Sate had removed the gag which Sam Trafalon had applied according to her orders, though still keeping Bryson bound in his easy-chair.

Thus she found him now, pale and a bit haggard, but cool, keen, fully on the alert, like one who knows only too plainly the nature of his adversaries.

"Growing impatient, dear fellow?" she smiled, dropping into a seat opposite her captive. "Are you beginning to think the game is not fully worth the candle?"

"It is your game, Miss Galway, not mine."

"Yet you are to reap the richest prize, after all! And, to tell the sober truth, I begin to doubt if you are wholly worthy it, Bryson!"

"In still plainer words, Miss Galway?"

"You are too cowardly! You fear to even reach out a hand to pluck the timid wild flower, lest a snake is hidden near its roots, or a thorn or two be hidden under its foliage! Almost any other man who loved as you claim to love, would be only too glad of a chance to take what only seemed to shrink from him."

"It must come willingly, or not at all, Miss Galway."

"But if its shrinking is only in seeming? If the flower is only too eager to be plucked, but pretends to be afraid? If—Bryson, why beat about the bush any longer?" as she leaned forward and rapidly added: "You are no fool. You know that Essie loves you, dearly, truly, passionately. You know that she has some silly scruple against wedding you, because her father's record is not quite as clean as it might be. But he's out of the way now. He got into a racket with Dipson last night, and they were both roasted in the old house."

"So you told me before," showing no sign of the black suspicion which really flashed into his brain.

"So the barrier of which the silly child prates, is but a shadow. She would really be glad if it might be brushed away, but she is not the one to do it. She had said so much on that score, you know, that for very shame she must stick to her notes!"

"Why can't you help her get over it? Why not help me play a pious fraud on the little goose? Why not cover her modesty with a bit of veil, and dull her sensitiveness with drugs so—"

"You need waste no further breath, Miss Galway," was the cold, yet stern interruption. "I flatly refuse your suggestion. If Essie Brown and I are to be made man and wife under your management, there shall be no drugs, no force, no actual cruelty on your side. She shall agree to wed with me of her own free will, or not at all!"

Sultana Sate flushed with rage, but managed to refrain from further damaging her cause by allowing it to break forth. And keeping silence until she felt that she could fairly control her tongue, she rose from her chair to, utter:

"You are almost too good for this every day world, Bryson! If I were only a little more of a saint, I'd try to marry you myself! As it is—let me whisper in your ear, dear fellow! I'm resolved to finger your ducats. If that will bring them unto me any easier, I'll help on your marriage with Essie Brown, despite the holy scruples which each of you appear to entertain. I'll bring her to you, and leave you together for a little while. Argue with the little angel, and do your best to win her consent. For—if you fail, I'll try my hand again, and succeed, if I have to summon Satan himself to my assistance!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

A FORLORN HOPE.

THE instant the door closed behind Sultana Sate, Allen Bryson permitted the mask to drop from his face and reveal his real torments.

Despite the bold, resolute demeanor which he maintained so successfully while under those keen eyes, he was growing sick at heart and full of dark fears, not for himself, but for the maiden whom he loved so ardently.

He knew how helpless he was, a stranger in that place, with no one to inquire after him, no one to even miss his face. He knew that only the boldest, most unscrupulous of plotters would dare attempt such a dastardly outrage as this, and he knew also that nothing short of death would be permitted to rob them of their prize, after going so far.

Yet, what more could he do than he was now doing? How could he better serve Essie Brown than by flatly refusing to part with even a dollar of his coveted wealth until she should openly and freely consent to become his wife? After that—

"They'll try to trip me up," he muttered, grimly. "They'll try to get proofs by which they can rake in my ducats, then send me over the range! But—can't I foil them there? Can't I guard both myself and my little woman? I believe I can!"

After all, it was a forlorn hope, but what else offered?

His brain was busy enough during the interval granted him, though he had already discounted every possible trick and scheme which could be brought into play by Sultana Sate and her allies. He could only go over them, one after another, marking the traps and pitfalls, arming himself against them as thoroughly as possible.

"If I could only insure poor Essie against their devilish cruelty! If I have only made them understand that any torture applied to her will but stiffen my backbone against yielding to their wishes!"

For fully an hour longer he was left alone with his thoughts, then the door opened and Sultana Sate pushed Essie Brown into the room, laughing lightly as the poor girl hung back, despite the eager cry that burst from the lips of her lover.

"You silly cat! Go give him what his lips are watering for, can't you? I'll hide my eyes and—well, if you are so perverse, blame yourself, not me!"

She forced Essie into a chair, deftly binding her fast therein as she frowned upon the angrily protesting Bryson.

"I'm only guarding against her making trouble for you both, my good fellow. You might coax her into setting you at liberty, and if I am to leave her free, I'll have to act as duenna. Take your choice!"

Bryson offered no further objections, as he saw that the bonds, while preventing Essie from assisting him, were not drawn tight enough to give her pain. And with the never failing hope of a lover, he felt that if he was free to repeat his arguments he must succeed in winning the prize he so dearly desired.

"I'll give you just one hour in which to talk matters over, and decide upon the hour for your wedding, gentle folks," coldly uttered Sultana Sate as she rose to her feet and retreated to the door. "At the end of that hour I will return. If you are agreed, well and good. If not—then I'll cease all talking and fall to acting instead!"

For a brief interval after her departure, neither lover spoke. Allen Bryson felt his heart swell within him as he noted how pale, how haggard, how hollow-eyed the maiden had grown of late, and that very knowledge of all she must have endured, led him to resolve more firmly than ever to save her despite herself, if arguments could avail.

"Essie, my poor little woman!" he murmured, trying vainly to keep his voice from trembling. "When I see you thus, I could almost curse the hour of my birth! Only for me, you would not have suffered so—"

"Don't, Allen," faintly uttered the poor girl, tears filling her eyes, her poor pretense of composure failing her at the very outset.

"I must be cruel in order to be kind," he said, tenderly. "We are in danger of worse than death, Essie, and there is only one way out of the toils, so far as I can see. If I had been a poor man, you would not have been drawn into the net, and so it's only right and just that my riches should set you free once more."

"It cannot—they would only take your money, and then be more cruel than ever!"

"There is one way in which I can guard against that, Essie," slowly ventured Bryson. "As my wife—"

"I cannot—pray never speak of that again, Allen!" sobbed the maiden, bowing her head and trying to veil her face with her dark hair.

For a brief space there was silence, save for her sobs. Then Allen Bryson gravely uttered:

"You know how dearly I love you, Essie. You know that, loving you so, I would never go against your wishes if I could help myself. Now, however, I must speak out, and you must listen as bravely as you may, for there is but the one forlorn hope, Essie! Only the one chance of escaping from those devils in human shape with life and honor!"

With a violent effort Essie partially conquered her emotions.

"I know what you mean, Allen, but you are wrong. Not even that impossible chance exists. Even if—if I could—"

"Consent to marry me, little woman," softly murmured Bryson.

"If I could do that," with a little gulp as if something was rising in her throat to choke her, "it would be even worse than useless."

"I do not think so, Essie. I believe that I am smart enough to foil them, even there. Not that I would try to trick them out of the money they lust for. They are welcome to every dollar I possess, just so they release you for all time. With you as my wife, darling, I would still be a rich man!"

"I cannot—I dare not, Allen!" with a hard, dry sob.

"Then not only is my fate sealed, but yours as well," gravely. "Of course I don't count. They can only kill me, for I'll never yield them one single dollar on any other condition than your becoming my legal wife. But you—think of Caleb Dipson, Essie! Think how much worse it will be if you are forced into marrying that despicable wretch!"

"They say he is dead, and with him—"

"I know, but I believe they lie," was the blunt interruption. "Or, if he is, be sure that woman-devil will be bitterly avenged upon you for being the prime cause of her utter failure to secure my money. No, Essie, we must look the facts squarely in the face. Either you must consent to become my wife, or we are both doomed beyond all earthly hope."

Even as he uttered the words, a slight flush of shame came into his face. It was cowardly, making such a plea, knowing how dearly she loved him, but he felt justified by the situation. And when once he had saved her, he would make ample amends.

"You do not know that woman, Allen," with forced calmness. She is lying when she holds out even the ghost of a hope. She will strip you of your money, and then kill you to guard against any after trouble."

"She means something of the sort, I can readily believe, but if you will trust me, Essie, I can and will foil her in that. I have had ample time for studying it all out, little woman, and swear to you, by all my hopes of future happiness in your company, that I can secure both our life and our perfect freedom, despite her present plans to the contrary."

"Essie, let me speak still more plainly to you, darling of my heart. It is a bitter necessity, but though it cuts me to the core, I must not throw away a single chance, for your own sweet sake!"

"Give the promise that evil woman asks, Essie. Marry me, according to her demands, and trust in my faith and honor for the rest. And on my part—listen, little woman, and weigh well your answer!"

"I swear that I can and will bear you clear of this evil gang, once you are my own wife. And then—as God hears my vow, Essie, I will claim no rights, I will not even touch your hand without your free permission. I will leave you the instant you are out of danger, never more to enter your presence until—unless you call me to your side. I will do even more, if you demand it, little woman, even though it kill the very soul within me! I will arrange for a divorce, which can readily be secured by fully representing the facts. Essie, can I say more?"

He ceased speaking, pale as death itself, an eager yet fearsome look in his eyes as he watched, waiting for her answer.

It did not come immediately, for her head was bowed, her eyes shedding tears the bitterness of which have been seldom equaled. In her heart and her brain a terrible war was raging. The one favored this dearly beloved suitor, the other condemned her yielding.

There was a bloody grave lying between them, and she felt that to join hands with him would be an unpardonable sin. Yet—what matter, so long as his dear life was saved? She could die, and he never know how she had sinned in order that he might live!

"Essie!" he softly, tremulously uttered. "Is it life, or—"

"Life, Allen," she gasped, faintly. "I will save you from—"

"That delightful matchmaker, Sadia Galway?" laughed Sultana Sate, flinging open the door and adding theatrically: "Bless you, my children!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A TROUBLED RASCAL.

TIME was when Falcon City would have scorned the idea of taking an interest in such a little, one-horse fire, even with the added inducement of a probable death or two; but that time had gone, together with the proud and lucrative title of "End of the Road!"

Thanks to its isolated situation, only the one building was destroyed, and as the alarm had been given too late for aught to be done by a simple and unorganized "bucket brigade," the citizens were content to stand around and watch the fire, wondering how it caught, and where its former occupants could be on such a momentous occasion?

But as the day grew older, talk grew more interesting, until he was a very uninteresting citizen indeed, who had not a tragic or a criminal theory to offer concerning the affair.

"Where is the fellow who lives there? Brown, he called himself, I believe, but Hades is full of just such Browns! If I was a minion of the law, or if I had the legal authority; well, *Pa* show you, gentlemen!"

There were others who had a word to say concerning a young and remarkably lovely maiden in connection with the house, and these were the most urgent in their inquiries as to what had become of the owners of the building which, by this time, was nothing but a mass of ashes and coals.

And then, just how or by what means no one seemed able to say, the report began to circulate that wild deeds had been perpetrated within that old shell on the night last past. Rumors of shrill shrieks and hideous yells; of pistol-shots and frightful oaths; of unanswered appeals for help, smothered too early by the smoke and rising flames.

And so, naturally enough, considering the fact that at least two members of the gang under command of Sultana Sate were busily stir-

ring in the matter, under instructions, the conclusion was reached that the proper thing to do would be to make a thorough investigation of the ruins in hopes of solving all doubts as to the loss of life.

One of the most restless, if reticent members of the constantly shifting group about the still smoking ruins, was Ben Brown himself, though he had altered his appearance so completely that not even the members of his own evil society recognized him as they met face to face.

Yet he had simply followed the hints given him by Sultana Sate; removing his curious growth of hair and beard, dyeing his skin a swarthy bronze to match the natural black of his eyes, and to harmonize with the false wig and full beard which he now donned.

The scene possessed a terribly strong interest for him, and after the first vain attempts to resist the fascination, he yielded completely to the subtle influence, prowling about the spot, his eyes furtively wandering round and round, to surely settle upon the smoking ashes which he felt assured rested immediately above the hideous remnant of what had, only a few short hours before, been his master!

As he prowled about, he caught many a disparaging remark as to himself, or rather his former self, but he only smiled grimly beneath his beard. Let the poor fools chatter! Ben Brown was dead, never to rise again. Dead—and the ghastly proofs lay waiting yonder beneath the ruins—right there!

He could mark the spot within a dozen inches!

It was a constant struggle to resist that temptation; only the stern warning given him by Sultana Sate prevented him from taking a prominent part in the comedy, as he still regarded the affair. Those blundering idiots! With one well-chosen word he could accomplish more than they had with thousands!

It was high noon before the talk fairly crystallized into action; but after the initial move was taken, Ben Brown felt himself at liberty to act as well as wish. And of all the workers about the ruins, he showed the most energy and directness, though he did not at once approach the spot where he could have taken oath the ghastly evidence alone was to be brought to the light of day.

Even then he betrayed a certain degree of cunning which he felt might be an aid in the end, for though his were the busiest arms, he seemed working under direction of his two mates for the time being.

His eyes glowed with a strange light as the layer of ashes and fragments of charcoal grew thinner and thinner, for with each movement of their tools he anticipated the discovery of—what?

Even in his intense though veiled excitement, he had to ask himself this question. For surely the discovery ought to have been made before this, unless the bodies had been almost entirely consumed.

How much heat did it require? Was it possible for such a blaze to entirely consume two strong, robust human beings? Surely—and yet, what other interpretation could be given?

Escape was impossible! Even as he fled from the cellar, he could swear that his once master was beginning to toast! And the alarm had not been given for nearly half an hour later. So—

He furiously plied his shovel, sending the debris flying in a very shower, though his two mates had already abandoned that spot as without the sought-for evidence. He was scraping the hard cellar-bottom. And not a body, not even a crumbling bone, had rewarded his eager search!

What did it all mean?

As he glanced bewilderedly around him, Ben Brown caught the keen gaze of Ross Kearney, who made a covert sign which mechanically drew the troubled ruffian to the side of the sport, who muttered:

"Take a back seat, you fool, unless you want to be found out! Let cooler heads do the searching, will you?"

Ben Brown dropped his tool, and with a dazed, stupid air watched the workers until the last man gave over in disgust, without finding aught to reward their labor. If life had been lost in that fire, all evidence had been licked up by the devouring flames.

Not until the last man left the spot did Ben Brown rouse from the curious stupor which had fallen upon his brain, temporarily benumbing his faculties. He reeled like a being already drunken as he sought the nearest saloon, to kill that horribly dry, parched sensation in his throat.

A couple of drinks partially revived him, and something like the truth began to steal into his confused brain. Though he had counted it as an impossibility, both Saul Sunday and Caleb Dipson must have escaped from that death-trap! But how? By what strange means? Who could have lent them the aid without which they were utterly helpless?

And as this sickening doubt grew upon him, the wretched criminal glanced about him with a growing dread of discovery and arrest.

To once more catch the warning look of Ross

Kearney. But this time it did not require a signal to draw Ben Brown to the side of the athletic gambler; he was a friend, therefore to be courted!

Huskily, agitatedly, Ben Brown revealed his new-born fears, and in the end declared that he was going to leave without further delay, lest worse should come of it. But Ross Kearney drew a hand through his arm and forced its owner to walk up the street in his company, saying in cold, resolute tones:

"You're trying to run from a shadow, my man! Keep on trying, and you'll run right up against the substance!"

"But—I can't stand any more of this horrible suspense!"

"There's another state of suspension even harder to bear," was the grimly significant retort. "Show the white feather now, and the gang will see to your reward. We want you here, for a day or so!"

"But—if those devils got clear?"

"How could they?" with a frown as he added: "I could almost wish they had, ruin or no ruin! Don't be an ass, Jack Robinson. They're safe enough, and their ashes scattered too widely ever to rise up as witness against you—in this world, at least! As for the other—well, I reckon what they can say will make precious little difference in your sentence, my man!"

Grim consolation, surely! And yet Ben Brown did feel a little relieved. If Ross Kearney could feel so safe, with great interest at stake, why should he eat his heart out with fear and forebodings?

"You will stay in town, handy for use if we want you, Jack Robinson," concluded Ross Kearney. "I do not say that we will. But it may possibly be that we'll have to bring you forward, even yet, to make Essie hold up her end squarely. If we do, be sure we don't have to hunt for you too long, my dear fellow!"

Ben Brown promised to keep on the alert, and parted from the gambler in a little more cheerful mood than he had joined him. But scarcely had they separated before the disguised ruffian was joined by one of the men who had followed his lead while working at the ruins.

"Hellow, pardner!" was the cheery greeting, as the stranger came out of a saloon, wiping his moist lips with a sleeve that still retained traces of that hour's labor amidst the hot ashes. "Been washing the rest o' that dust out of my throat, for—ugh!" with a short shiver and wry grimace at the grim idea. "Hope may die if it didn't taste like dead man's ashes!"

Ben Brown laughed harshly at the hideous fancy, but it was mirth almost as ghastly. After all, had he not been tasting the same?

He would have passed on, but the stranger, who introduced himself as Perry Lawler, late from Quivering Asp, joined him in his walk, and together they soon found themselves nearing the ruins.

Ben Brown gave a superstitious start as he noted this fact, and his face showed ghastly pale through its liberal coating of dye. He would have turned to flee from the spot, only for that genial laugh and cordial grasp of his arm as a flask of whisky was gently introduced to his notice.

"Wash the dust out, pardner, for I'm in a hurry to do the same, but up our way it's 'after you is manners!' laughed the stranger, lightly.

"Queer, ain't it, how such fool ideas will stick in a fellow's noggin? Now I'm open to bet big money that there wasn't a life lost in that bonfire! For, if there had been, some of us would have run across the evidence—don't you see? So—here's luck to Ben Brown, and may he have no trouble in collecting his insurance money."

He lifted the flask to his lips and held it there the better part of a half-minute, but Ben Brown never noticed how great his thirst appeared to be. He was staring at the ruins, with something of that old dull stupor stealing over his brains.

Where now was his hated master? Where now was Caleb Dipson? Vanished forever from mortal ken, turned to a handful of ashes? Or skulking under cover, ready to pounce upon his slave?

He asked himself the questions, but curiously enough he made no attempt to answer them, even to himself. He did not seem to care much, one way or the other. His brain seemed growing deadened. It was difficult for him to make out the words which his new-found friend was uttering, just then!

He fancied that Perry Lawler was talking about the supposed dead men whose ashes they had been searching for, and he mumbled something in response, but what that something was, he could never have explained.

Like one in a dream he felt that a strong arm was steadying his footsteps as they moved away from the ruins. He dimly felt something hot and fiery passing down his throat, but what it was he could only surmise from his old habit of hard drinking.

He knew, too, that they were walking somewhere out of the town, for the way was rough and his feet so apt to trip and blunder over stones and roots. And once he fell flat upon his face, to be set upright once more by a laughing friend.

Friend, of course! Who but a friend would take such an uncommon interest in a poor, broken, miserable devil? And with that lugubrious thought, Ben Brown tried to thank his friend, when—

A strong hand hurled him to the ground and a harsh voice demanded:

"Ben Brown, where is my daughter? Where is my poor little girl?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN UNBIDDEN GUEST.

SULTANA SATE lost no time in claiming the fruits of her dangerous scheming, once Essie Brown gave her consent to that strange wedding. And both the woman and her ally, Ross Kearney, performed wonders, considering the brief time at their disposal.

For one reason they feared to give the poor girl time for thought or reflection, lest she even yet draw back and ruin their hopes. For another, scarcely less important, they dreaded outside interference.

Though Ross Kearney laughed at the fears expressed by Ben Brown, this utter absence of proof in the ruins that two dangerous men had gone to their final account, troubled him seriously. He knew that it was almost impossible for a human body to be reduced to ashes by a fire which, though fierce, was so short-lived. And since no traces were found, the chances were that by some strange means both Cale Dipson and Solemn Saul had escaped with life.

"Let it be so, then!" flashed Sultana Sate, showing her teeth. "Let them come to the wedding if they dare! And if we can only get the words safely spoken, they may even come and welcome!"

Yet, despite her bold speech, Sadia Galway would have welcomed more time, if only to perfect her plans for stripping Allen Bryson to the last dollar. As it was, there might be a possible hitch, though she resolved to have all documents signed and made over to her, before she permitted bride and groom to leave the room where the ceremony was to take place.

Ross Kearney invited the justice of the peace who was to tie the knot, smoothing over the rough places as best he could while waiting for the critical moment.

'Squire Blake was too keen and clear-headed to be wholly duped, and while wishing he might be more easily led, the schemers knew that his testimony, when they came to reap their harvest, would carry much more weight than that of any more pliable tool.

Ross Kearney gently hinted that the bride would probably act a little queerly for such a usually happy moment, but this would be understood when it was remembered that the fate of her father, her only relative who had not been dead for years, was mysteriously missing.

As the story of the fire and its possible victims had already spread through the ground, 'Squire Blake needed but little more than a hint on this point, and promised to make the ceremony as brief and little trying to the poor, afflicted creature as might be.

While Ross Kearney was engaged after this fashion, Sadia Galway took it upon herself to warn Allen Bryson that any move in the programme not fairly set down opposite his name, would surely end in a tragedy, not only to himself, but to the lady of his love.

"I have let you off much lighter than I intended, dear boy, rather than utterly crush that silly little cat; but don't you presume too much on the leniency thus shown, for if you do, you'll get left badly!"

"All I ask is the literal fulfillment of our contract, Miss Galway," was the grave response. "I'll perform my part, if you live up to yours. But—understand one thing, I beg of you. If you try to play crooked, I'll not only foil your lopes, but I'll kill you in the bargain."

Despite her audacious nerve, Sultana Sate shivered at this coldly-determined speech. She believed him entirely in her power, and yet—he seemed a master, not a slave!

For obvious reasons, it was determined to have no person present at the ceremony, outside of those immediately concerned. Unless Essie should fail, at the critical moment, there could hardly be any occasion for a scene. Allen Bryson would not dare attempt to use force in defense of his riches, so long as he knew his loved one was in danger. And Sultana Sate had repeatedly warned him that her death would surely follow any move on his part not laid down in the contract.

The rest of her time was devoted to Essie, strengthening her resolve to marry her lover, and "bracing her up" for the ordeal.

Sultana Sate might have saved herself much of this mental worry, could she have read the heart and mind of her pale-faced victim. Essie intended to go through the ceremony without any further hesitation.

"Then—when he is safe, I will die!"

The poor, half-crazed child fully meant to be as good as her word, though she made no attempt to blind herself to the nature of her crime. Still, she was lost. And if she could preserve his life, what matter?

Few there were who would have suspected what lay beneath the surface, could the whole

world have been admitted to witness that ceremony. And sharp, shrewd, keen-witted though 'Squire Blake undeniably was, even he found little ground for suspicion that aught crooked or underhand was going on inside that quiet house.

Naturally enough, when his promise to spare the feelings of the bride is considered, he asked for a few words with the happy groom before calling the couple into the room where the wedding was to take place. And fearing to refuse this perfectly natural request, Ross Kearney complied, himself bringing Allen Bryson forward and briefly introducing him to the official.

"I think you will find him all right, 'squire," blandly smiled the gambler, after the introduction. "I'm positive he is of legal age, and his own master. How long he remains thus, depends partly on you, partly on our little Essie! Eh, Bryson?"

"The chains cannot be welded too soon for me, and a man is never a man until he has acknowledged his slavery—to one fair woman," gravely yet brightly retorted the young man, gripping the hand which was offered him by the 'squire.

That brief speech came from the heart, yet the cunningest craft could hardly have formed a more perfect guard, and 'Squire Blake simply put the ordinary questions, never once dreaming of what a dark and criminal plot underlay the surface.

Ross Kearney drew a soft breath of relief, for all that day he had felt under a shadow, and the more he tried to banish it, the deeper it grew. Now he felt that at least one peril was fairly passed.

Yet he dared not leave the two men together, though he longed to hurry Sultana Sate. While he was present, Allen Bryson would hardly dare utter a dangerous speech, but if left alone with the justice of the peace, he might not be able to resist the temptation.

Fortunately for Kearney's peace of mind, they were not kept waiting much longer. Sadia Galway was fully as impatient to have the ordeal over, and at the earliest possible moment she came down-stairs, leading the bride elect.

Allen Bryson caught his breath with a painful gasp as he saw how deathly pale his beloved was, but he found some faint comfort in noting her steady step, her fearless eyes, her clear, firm, if low responses to the questions which 'Squire Blake gently propounded, as part of his duty to himself and the law of which he was a disciple.

With difficulty Sultana Sate choked back an exultant laugh as the 'squire professed himself content, and motioned the "happy couple" to take position before him as he opened his book.

After all her troubled plotting and scheming, brushing obstacles from her path sufficient to have defeated a thousand ordinary plotters, to succeed so perfectly, so smoothly, so seemingly of course! It was even richer than her maddest fancy had dared picture!

Gravely Allen Bryson made his few responses, his strong right hand clasping that of his bride, trying to lend her encouragement and strength from his own store.

And to all appearance he succeeded in his wish, for Essie never faltered, or showed sign of weakness, from the beginning to the end, even though she knew this was the beginning of the end; that, instead of being wedded to this man whom she loved better than life, she was plighting her troth to grim death!

Not even Allen Bryson suspected aught of this, so perfectly had the poor girl schooled herself to bear the terrible ordeal. And even while 'Squire Blake was pronouncing the final words that made them man and wife, Sultana Sate softly whispered in the ear of Kearney:

"The little cat! She'd have fought like a demon had we tried to prevent her having the fellow!"

The gambler made no reply. He could not believe this, even though it came from the lips of the woman for whose love he had already blighted his soul through all eternity! He never felt more guilty than now, as he gazed mistily into that deathly pale face, so hard, so emotionless and unnatural in one of Essie's naturally lively disposition.

The gallant 'squire closed his book, and with a deferential bow to the bridegroom, touched that statuesque brow with a fatherly kiss.

And Sultana, smiling, as though the gayest of the gay, was just offering her congratulations, when the closed door was rudely flung open and a tall figure rushed into the apartment, excitedly uttering:

"Ef it ain't, I want to know *why*! I knowed I'd ketch her, fu'st or last, an' thar—Seraphina Angelica Lovejoy! come to me arms, honey!"

It was Solemn Saul, the Sad Man from San Saba!

CHAPTER XXXV.

SOLEMN SAUL AS "BEST MAN."

SULTANA turned at that unwelcome sound, but the frown which instinctively leaped to her face faded away like magic as she recognized the being whom she had, only a few short hours before, condemned to a horrible death!

The sight seemed to petrify her for a single

breath, and this gave Kearney time for interfering.

"I think you have mistaken the place, sir," he spoke, his tones hard and only thinly covering a deadly menace as he strode swiftly between the woman of his love and the thimble-rigger. "You'll have to look further for the lunatic asylum!"

One hand was at his breast, and with a significant gesture he called Saul Sunday's attention to the fact, showing the muzzle of a wide-bored derringer, though keeping it hidden from all others. But if the strolling vagabond saw, he did not heed.

His little gray eyes were roving keenly from the face of Sultana to that of Essie, and he seemed actually puzzled which of the two he should claim as being his long-lost seraph.

"Shall I show you the door, stranger?" a little more sharply persisted the athletic gambler, now fairly within reach of the gaunt intruder. "Must I repeat that you are hardly welcome, just at this moment? Don't oblige me to use force, but—*will* you go?"

As though he had for the first time noticed the existence of such a being, Saul gazed with widely-opened eyes into that cold, yet dangerous face, a startling change coming over his own, a moment later.

"Hellow! ef it ain't, I'm a howlin'— Dwight Ambry!"

The sound of that name appeared to shatter the spell which had fallen over Sultana Sate, and with a choking cry she sprang forward, catching Kearney by the arm so sharply as to knock the derringer from his grasp, just as he jerked it forth for use.

With marvelous dexterity Solemn Saul caught the gambler by both wrists, holding him helpless while breathing a word into his ear. And at the same time Sadia Galway shrunk back, trembling like a leaf, pale as a corpse, all her boasted nerve vanishing as another unbidden guest strode into the room!

Rudely picturesque he looked, this wildly-dressed mountaineer, but there was a fire in his eyes, a manner which Gabe Gunn had never before shown in Falcon City as he gained the side of that shrinking woman, one hand closing upon her arm, his burning gaze seeming to hold her as with the fabled fascination of a rattlesnake.

At the first symptom of trouble, Allen Bryson encircled his wife with a strong arm, drawing her back to a corner where he could guard both her and himself, glancing from one to another of the four more prominent figures.

As for 'Squire Blake, he stood lost in amazement, staring mutely over the silver-bowed glasses which were as much a part of his dress as his coat or his boots.

"The jig's up, Kearney, and your trying to kick can only injure the woman you love," Solemn Saul breathed into the ear of the gambler, a flash of his eyes indicating Sadia Galway. "Look at the man who's got her in his grip, and see for yourself."

"If he harms her!"

"Try to interfere, and he'll kill her!" was the warning retort.

At the same moment Gabe Gunn, the self-styled "Grizzly from Ginseng" was whispering words into the ear of Sultana, which she alone could hear. They must have been almost magical, judging from the strange influence they bore.

Instantly her struggles ceased. She stood motionless by his side, even forcing a smile to her ghastly, pale face, as a slight sound drew both their eyes toward the door.

Caleb Dipson, pale, haggard, his lips marred by a strip of court-plaster, was entering the room, his bloodshot eyes roving swiftly and anxiously from figure to figure, as though fearful his reception might prove warmer than agreeable. But as his gaze rested on Essie and her newly-wedded husband, something like a smile lit up his countenance.

With open hands he edged toward them, keeping outside of Kearney's reach, muttering huskily:

"Not as an enemy any longer, but as a friend, if you'll permit," his humble bow including both Essie and Allen. "I've gone wrong long enough. Now—take this, Mr. Bryson, and defend your wife with your life, as I shall with mine!"

And he held forth a revolver, butt foremost, which was readily accepted by Bryson. Now! Now he could keep his mental vow! Now he could defy all his and her enemies!

Poor 'Squire Blake dropped into a chair, utterly "broken up," as he himself would have expressed it. To save his life he could not keep track of all these changes and transformations!

"One word," said Gabe Gunn, his tones cold and grave, as his keen eyes glanced around the room, lingering longest perhaps on Ross Kearney. "There is no evil intended on our part. We trust and even hope that everything may even yet be arranged satisfactorily to every person now within these four walls. But to bring that about, I must beg Sadia Galway to grant me a few minutes in private."

"Not without her own free consent!" flashed Kearney.

"Are you willing to grant my prayer, Miss

"Galway?" asked the mountaineer. "If you feel the slightest reluctance, pray say so."

"I will go with you. I have no hesitation," was the response.

Without another word or glance toward Kearney, Gabe Gunn drew her hand through his arm and led her from the room.

Solemn Saul laughed softly as he released the wrists of the tall gambler, evidently feeling assured against any further trouble from that quarter, bending to pick up the dangerous toy from the carpet.

"Queer, ain't it, how sech a leetle thing kin bite so deep an' bark so loud!" he remarked, as he turned the weapon over in his hands, admiring its grim beauties before handing it back to its rightful owner. "Mighty handy things fer to hev in a tough crowd, but kinder out o' place whar a lovin' couple is gittin' hitched in double harness fer life, don't you think? 'Specially when they're 'lowed to drap out onbeknown, as this 'ne did!'"

In silence Kearney accepted the weapon, thrusting it into his bosom, a sorely troubled light in his big blue eyes.

"What is it?" he muttered huskily. "Who is that big fellow? What has he to do with Miss Galway?"

Saul flashed a warning glance toward the other parties in the room, then drew Kearney nearer the window, a curious look upon his gaunt face, and still stranger light in his gray eyes.

"What'd ye say ef I was to hint at a strawberry mark, an' a long lost kin—brother, maybe. What ef I was to say that—be durned ef I know jest *what* to say!" with charming honesty as he met that uneasy gaze. "Play we don't say nothin' at all, pardner, but jest wait an' take it easy ontel that seraph o' mine comes back with the leddy?"

"Who is he, I ask you?" with a dangerous gleam leaping into his eyes. "What right has he to crowd in here and kick up such a row?"

"Oh, ef you putt it in that shape, why—take a squat, pardner, an' I'll do the best I know how fer to unravel the knittin' work to suit ye clean down to the ground!" and the thimble-rigger dropped upon the window-sill by way of example. "You see, this is the way the old thing works:

"Last night—eh?" as Kearney gave a start. "Well, I'm not particular, pardner. We'll skip last night, or a part of it, anyway. I never was much of a hand fer to rub it in when a critter owned up to bein' fairly downed, an' even ef I was—the old gent is comin', and that lets me out!"

Despite the readiness with which his tongue wagged, Saul could not entirely disguise his relief at the approach of 'Squire Blake. Evidently he was not quite prepared to reveal the whole mystery to Ross Kearney.

"May I ask what all this means, Mr. Kearney?" a little stiffly uttered the justice of the peace. "Surely there was nothing crooked in the ceremony which I have just completed? I have not been imposed on, I trust, sir?"

"Lord love ye, 'squire!" laughed Saul Sunday cheerily, gripping the old gentleman by the hand and pressing it until the joints cracked. "Never a bit of it, sir. They wouldn't 'a' bit even this weenty little hitch, ef pardner an' me could 'a' got here promptly on time. Which it wasn't our fault, nur yit the fault o' anybody else, fer that matter. Jest a sorter onluckyness, ye know. An' so fur from wantin' you to undo the splicin' work you've done, I'm pritty nigh sure that'll be *another* job o' the same sort fer you to do afore you leave."

Kearney uttered a gasping sound that might have turned into a savage curse had not Saul whirled toward him, catching his hands and beaming blandly into his white face as he added:

"Tickles ye clean through an' back ag'in, don't it, pardner? Waal, I ain't wonderin' at that a weenty bit!" heaving a doleful sigh. "I do reckon I'd feel jest the same way ef I was to find Seraphina Angelica Lovejoy, an' we be as nigh to gittin' hitched fer life as you an' Sady be—good Lawd, yes, sir!"

"But I didn't know—" began the 'squire, helplessly, only to be deftly cut short by Saul.

"Nur we didn't none o' us know it fer dead sure, which is the why they wasn't nothin' said in advance, ye see, 'squire. But now—brace up, Kearney, an' look the prittiest you knows how! They're comin' back!"

The door opened and Gabe Gunn, with Sadia Galway leaning on his arm, entered the room.

Both were pale, and the woman seemed to be moving like one in a dream. All her fiery spirit had vanished, and she never lifted her dark eyes even when Gabe Gunn led her across the room to where Kearney was standing, lost in amazement and doubt.

"We'll let 'em chin a weenty bit, I reckon, 'squire," muttered Solemn Saul, drawing the curious justice aside. "An' mebbe you kin give me a few wrinkles on the way a feller's got to conduct himself when he tempts fer to act as best man fer the fu'st time. Ye see—"

"Ross Kearney," coldly spoke Gabe Gunn, lowering his tones so that none other in the room could catch his words. "Will you do what you

can to atone for the past, by marrying this woman?"

"Sadia—what does all this mean? What right—"

"I will fully explain everything which can in the least concern you, Mr. Kearney, after you have answered my question," interposed the mountaineer. "Will you marry this woman, if she asks it?"

"Do you ask it, Sadia?" quickly, almost painfully breathed the agitated gambler. "You know I could ask no greater boon of all nature! But—unless of your own free will, I—"

"Answer him, Sadia Galway!" sternly ordered Gabe Gunn.

"I do—I beg of you to marry me, Ross Kearney!" came the faint and strained response.

"I will—and when you are my wife, I'll call to account every person who has dared to harm, threaten or abuse you, little woman!" the gambler declared, his handsome face flushing with a strange mingling of joy, gratitude and fierce menace.

But, Gabe Gunn left them alone together, hastily making a few bare explanations to the bewildered 'squire, promising him a full answer to every question he might see fit to ask, the moment the ceremony was completed. And after a few minutes spent in this manner, the strangely plighted couple stood up before the justice, going through with the same forms so recently exercised by another pair of loving hearts.

Stern and grave, Gabe Gunn stood behind the pair, watching each movement, listening to each word as though he even yet feared some act of rebellion; but not so Solemn Saul.

The novelty of acting as "best man" seemed to give him the highest possible degree of joy, and he supplied smiles enough for the entire wedding party!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A WRONGED MAN'S VENGEANCE.

"WHO wouldn't act as best man, fer sech a gelorious— Beg pardon, pardner," with an exaggerated bow toward Ross Kearney, as he boldly stole a kiss from the ghastly pale cheek of the latest bride. "But, I really couldn't help it, an' was afeerd to ax ef that's the style, lest somebody 'd choke me off afore I tasted the honey! An' you—'nough fer a thousan', an' every pesky bit yours! Good Lord! Ef I could only run up ag'inst my Seraphina Angelica Lovejoy! Ef I only could, now!"

Before Kearney could resent this impudence, or even brush the lips of his wife himself, Gabe Gunn drew him away from her side and led him through the door across the hall and into another room.

Saul lingered only long enough to place Sadia in the care of 'Squire Blake, then followed after the two men, his own face growing cold and hard as he passed from the room.

He found the two standing opposite each other, a table between them, grave and silent, as though waiting for his arrival. A single glance showed him this much, then he closed and locked the door behind him, placing his back against it as though standing guard.

Gabe Gunn spoke:

"Ross Kearney, you wanted to know by what right I interfered: by what right I intruded upon your carefully selected company: by what authority I bade Sadia Galway ask you to marry her. I promised to answer your questions, and I can do so in no more effective manner than by revealing myself as I am, not as I seem."

With a deft touch he removed the shaggy mass of hair and beard from his person, showing a handsome, strong face, but one from which Kearney involuntarily recoiled with a hoarse, choking cry.

"Dwight Ambry!"

"Dwight Ambry, the husband of the woman whom you led astray, Ross Kearney!" coldly uttered the other, yet with a blazing fire in his eyes, that told how intensely his passions were seething below the surface.

"Then why—"

"Why that farce in the other room, you would ask?" interposed the wronged man, still with that ominous steadiness of tone, so flatly contradicted by his burning gaze. "I will explain my reasons for planning that marriage in good time, sir. Just now—"

"I wonder if you ever took time to consider how much a man can endure in this world, yet still continue to live? Did you ever stop to ask yourself how much more guilty you were in killing a heart, while leaving the spark of life lingering in the body?"

"What I have done, I stand ready to answer for," avowed the gambler, facing his accuser unflinchingly, yet making no effort to draw the weapon which all knew he possessed ready to his hand.

"Until you came across my path, I was happy as mortal man ever gets to be in this poor world," added Gabe Gunn, or Dwight Ambry, as he must now be called. "I was rich enough for comfort. I was young, strong, healthy, able and willing to work for those I loved as few men are capable of loving. I had a beautiful wife. We had a child, fair to look upon, though she more nearly resembled her

father than her mother. All this—until you came upon the scene!"

"I am not blaming you altogether. There must have been suitable soil for the evil seed you sowed. My wife was an angel in my eyes, up to the hour I discovered her guilt; then she was a devil!"

"If I could have found you then, while my brain was hottest, I would have killed you both. Had I found you any time within the year, I would still have struck without stopping long enough to accuse either. And even now—well, I will still strike, but before exacting my just vengeance, I can have patience to talk, to question."

"When my wife fled with you, she took our child with her. At first I hardly gave the little one a thought. I could only think of my wife—the first, the last, the only woman I ever loved, save my lead mother. But then, I remembered my little girl child, and as the weary, hopeless search grew longer and seemingly less likely to be rewarded, I thought of her more and more until—"

"Ross Kearney, tell me what has been done with my child!"

Fiercely came the question, but the gambler never altered his stiffly erect position, never changed a muscle.

"I decline to answer, Dwight Ambry."

There was a brief silence, broken at last by the wronged man's turning toward the door where Solemn Saul stood on guard, making a gesture which brought the gaunt thimble-rigger promptly forward.

"There are the tools, gentlemen," he said, gravely, as he placed a pair of single derringers on the table, together with a small powder-flask bullets and patches. "I will prepare them under your eyes, in a moment, but—Mr. Kearney, may I ask you to hold up your hands while I remove such weapons as you may happen to have about your person?"

Without a word the sport complied, a faint smile playing about his lips as he did so. After all, what matter? If these two men meant his death, all his efforts could not foil them. And then—since that ceremony was but a farce—since Sadia Ambry's lawful husband was still alive—why not? He had nothing left to live for!

But his suspicions were without foundation in truth. The moment he was disarmed, Dwight Ambry submitted to the same process.

"Load the tools, Sunday, so that Mr. Kearney can see everything is on the square. As for me—I'll draw up a brief statement."

He wrote rapidly for a few minutes, using two bits of paper, for the greater part duplicating his words on each.

Meanwhile Saul Sunday deftly charged the weapons, submitting each bullet to the keen eyes of the gambler. Then, pressing the caps gently into place, for the tools were of the old style, he placed them both on the table, covering them with a steady hand until they should be wanted.

"Ross Kearney, I am going to shoot you, or you are fated to shoot me, before we leave this room, unless you are too great a coward to face the man whom you have so terribly wronged. But—despite the bitter black shame with which that woman covered my name, I wish to make her future punishment as light as possible. For—I loved her once!"

"I will meet you more than half way on that ground. There need be no duel. If you are too big a coward to kill me, I'll save you the trouble. Give me one of those guns, please!"

"If fate allots it you, all right but not unless," was the stern response. "Read this paper, please. It simply states that you have shot yourself, in remorse for having once sinned deeply. I have its duplicate, save that I die because a woman loved you better than she could me. Dare you sign that paper, Ross Kearney, and so save your wife the shame of a public explanation, before a law court?"

"My wife?" ejaculated Kearney, for the first time showing signs of agitation. "But—you are not dead, yet?"

"Her husband is, in the eye of the law," was the response. "I secured a divorce from Sadia Ambry, over a year ago. My friend, here, has all the papers necessary to prove this, and will hand them to you in case of your survival. Now—dare you sign that statement?"

Without a word Kearney wrote his name under the lines, in a bold, free, characteristic signature. And in another instant Dwight Ambry imitated his example.

In equal silence, Solemn Saul used the pen to mark a black cross on one of two slips of paper, folding them and dropping them into his hat, lifting that article above his head as he held it toward Kearney.

"After you," bowed the gambler, with a faint smile and low bow.

Dwight Ambry instantly drew a slip passing it across the table to his adversary for his inspection. One glance, then the gambler buttoned his coat closely, squarely facing his enemy, erect and steady as a veteran soldier on parade.

"You have won, Mr. Ambry. Take your shot, please. I would have killed, had fortune

frowned upon you, and you can do no less—as a man and a gentleman!”

“Spare your breath, Mr. Kearney, for I mean to claim all fortune grants me. But first—my daughter?”

“Ask your—ask her mother,” was the answer. “If she refused to tell you, be sure I’ll never foil her wishes!”

“Not even if I promise to give you the life you have just forfeited?”

There was no reply. Only a faint, sneering smile curled those pale lips as he calmly awaited his death. Whatever else he might be, Ross Kearney was no coward.

Ambry raised his derringer until its grim muzzle fairly covered the heart of his enemy. The range was so short that he had no need to bring the weapon up to his eye. And when once convinced his aim was sure, he stared steadily into those unflinching blue orbs, striving hard to break down that marvelous nerve; but, all in vain. Not a tremor, not even the quivering of an eyelash! Then—

A loud report, and Ross Kearney fell backward.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

“GO, AND SIN NO MORE.”

SULTANA SATE sunk into a chair, burying her face in her hands, only a wreck of her usual proud, imperious self, shivering as though in a chill, trembling and shrinking at each little sound after a fashion which none would have deemed less likely than herself but half an hour ago.

“Squire Blake tried to learn from her something of the mystery which had so suddenly developed itself, but she neither heard nor heeded him, and finally he passed over to where Caleb Dipson stood, revolver in hand, acting as guard to the young woman whom he had so persistently persecuted.

“I have nothing to say, ‘squire,” that worthy curtly uttered. “I am only a common deck-hand, and you’ll have to wait until the captain or the first mate comes on deck again.”

He had been a little more communicative to Allen and Essie, however, in his eagerness to explain his sudden and complete conversion, though he had been unable or unwilling to reveal the whole glad truth. What he did say awoke a ray of hope in the bosom of the despairing girl, and she made no effort to escape from the warm, strong, encouraging grasp which Bryson lent her little hands.

Thus the quintette were ranged when the oppressive silence was broken by a loud report, plainly coming from the next room, and equally as plain the report of a gun or a pistol.

Sultana Sate lifted her head, springing to her feet with a wild, gasping cry:

“My love—my husband—murdered—murdered!”

Her hands rose to clasp her temples, and she staggered blindly back, only saved from an ugly fall by the quick grasp of Cale Dipson, who gently guided her to the seat she had just left.

The door opened and Dwight Ambry entered the room, his strong face cold and grave, though his eyes were fairly ablaze as he regarded the fair, false woman through whom he had suffered so.

“Squire Blake started toward him as though resolved to learn what all that confusion really covered, but Ambry motioned him back, and the half-stupefied official mechanically obeyed.

“Sadie,” he uttered, his voice stern and hard. “Sadie Kearney!”

With a start the wretched woman lifted her head, stirred by that new name, a pitiful spark of her old spirit showing itself in the words:

“Coward! You have murdered him—my love, my—”

“Your husband, you were about to say, Sadie Kearney,” interrupted Ambry, coming a pace nearer and holding forth a small piece of paper on which were written a few lines in ink. “For two reasons it cannot be murder. One is that over his own signature Kearney declares that he shot himself because of a great wrong once committed. Another is that life still lingers in his body.”

“Let me go to him! I will go! You dare not attempt to keep man and wife apart at such a moment!” panted the half-crazed woman, struggling with something of her old strength and energy against the hand which forced her back into the chair.

“It is such a terrible crime to separate man and wife, isn’t it, Sadie?” flashed Ambry, a merciless smile playing upon his face for an instant, then vanishing as he added: “You shall see your husband before he dies, Sadie, on one condition. ‘Where is my daughter?’”

With trembling hands the woman took a letter from her pocket.

“There—you will find her there, at school. I only received the letter yesterday, and—For the love of Heaven, let me go to my love!”

One glance showed Ambry the letter had passed through the post; another its postmark, that of a western city. He opened it and saw enough to convince him that Sadie was not trying to deceive him further. Then, still restraining the woman, he gave a low whistle.

Almost immediately the door was flung open, and Solemn Saul entered, one hand thrust through the arm of Ross Kearney!

Pale, a burnt and powder-blackened patch directly over his heart, but looking decidedly strong and hearty for a corpse, or even a man who had so recently received an ounce ball directly through that important organ.

With a low cry of mingled wonder and joy, Sadie rose to her feet, but Kearney never even glanced toward her, until after receiving a consenting glance from Ambry. Then the athletic gambler caught Sultana Sate in his arms, holding her thus as though she might be a sobbing, frightened, weak little child.

Ambry turned away from them, his face stern and grave as his eyes roved over the other persons then present, each one of whom, to a greater or a less degree, exhibited wonder, doubt, even dread, so many and so startling had been the transformations that evening.

“Squire Blake,” he said, gravely, apparently guided by the respect due to age, rather than from any particular reverence for the law itself as thus personified. “I owe it to you as to the authority you represent, to briefly explain why I have acted after such an extraordinary fashion on this occasion. But, first, will you pass me your word of honor to keep secret all you may see and hear this night?”

“Not if it is in violation of the law, sir,” stoutly declared the bewildered justice. “And I must say, sir, that—”

“You may say it all after I have finished my explanation, ‘squire,” with a faint smile. “I will not tax your patience very severely. I would not tax it at all, only I have a sacred duty to perform to others, as well as to myself. Part of that duty is to prevent false reports escaping this little circle; part—But you can judge when I have told all I must tell.

“This woman was once my wife. Never mind what parted us. Enough that we were separated, and that over a year ago I procured a divorce on the grounds of desertion. You, ‘squire, shall see the proofs, and satisfy yourself that I am telling the simple truth.

“When I lost my wife, I also lost my daughter, then but little more than an infant. Her mother refused to give me a clew to her whereabouts, and so did Ross Kearney. To extort this information, for one reason, I separated the newly-made man and woman. He stood the test, though he believed death inevitable, and—”

“And I ask pardon for my part in that bit of sleight-of-hand performance,” laughed Saul Sunday. “I palmed the bullets, and when a blank charge exploded, I lent a foot to help make matters more binding! Hope the tumble didn’t jar you too hefty, pardner!”

“My ruse succeeded,” exhibiting the letter. “This is written by my child. She is at school, under care of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart Convent, in St. Joseph, Mo. She is well, and—I am as nearly happy and contented as I ever expect to be in this world!”

He turned toward the recently-wedded couple, his voice harder than ever as he resumed:

“As for you, Ross Kearney, one word more. If the whole truth of this night’s work ever leaks out, men may say that I was a weak, simple ass to suffer so long and so bitterly, to in the end bid those who shadowed my whole life go in peace! But, let them talk. I care little for the world, outside of my little ewe lamb.

“I tested you to-night, and you stood the test. You cannot be all evil, or you would have flinched when death seemed staring you full in the face. Nor would you have offered to take your own life, so as to the more thoroughly screen the woman who is now your wife.

“If you had failed, I believe I would have slain you, as for more years I now care to recall, I hunted you to slay. As it is—I bid you go, and sin no more than you can help, for the future!”

“I thank you, not for myself, but for my wife,” gravely responded the gambler, drawing Sadie still closer to his side, an arm wound protectingly about her shivering form.

“May she repay you better than she did me!” with an involuntary flash of bitterness which was regretted as soon as shown.

“I love him!” hoarsely cried Sadie, lifting her haggard face and fairly encountering the gaze of her divorced husband. “I only thought I loved you, Dwight Ambry. You were too good—too perfect for poor me! And—Ross is just wicked enough!”

“May neither of you ever regret the choice thus expressed,” with just the ghost of a smile flitting across his strong face. “I trust you may live happily together. And, in all candor I must add that I also trust our pathway will never cross again from this hour!”

“It can’t begin diverging any too soon to suit me. Come, Sadie!”

“One minute, please,” interposed Ambry, checking them as they turned as if to leave the house. “My work is yet incomplete. You must linger long enough to see it finished. Sunday, will you be so kind as to escort your prisoner into the presence of our friends?”

The gaunt thimble-rigger left the room, soon

after returning, pushing before him a downcast, sullen prisoner, handcuffed and manacled.

“Father!” gasped Essie Bryson, turning pale as a corpse.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AN APPROPRIATE EXIT.

WITH only a passing glance toward the almost swooning girl, Dwight Ambry turned again toward the last comer, signing Saul Sunday to place him in the chair.

“Sit down, Benjamin Jack Brown Robinson!” briskly commanded the thimble-rigger, enforcing his commands by the same foot which had lent its aid to the exploding powder before which Ross Kearney had fallen so dramatically but a few minutes earlier. “Head up and nose to the front! The seraph wants you to preach a bit of a sermon to this august assembly, Benjamin, and so forth!”

“What must I say, you devil?” growled the prisoner, sullenly.

“The simple truth, or you know what to expect,” responded Ambry. “First, look at that poor lady,” nodding to where Allen Bryson tenderly supported the nearly unconscious figure of his wife. “You have called her your daughter ever since her infancy, almost. Were you lying, or is she really your own daughter?”

“I was lying,” with dogged distinctness.

“Thank God!” cried Essie, hiding her face in the bosom of her husband.

“She is no blood kin to me,” added the prisoner. “She belonged to a friend of mine. I was in love with his wife, once. She took him, before me. Then—well, when they died, I took care of the kid, for that old love. And then—somehow I grew to liking her for her own sake. And so—I kept her with me. In time I grew to almost believe she was my kid.”

“Why, then, did you so bitterly persecute her? Why try to force her into marrying such a wretch as Cale Dipson?”

“Because he had me foul,” his strange eyes drooping, his voice growing less clear and steady. “Because he ferreted out a crime of mine, and threatened to shove my neck into a noose if I didn’t—the hottest flames of hell be his winding sheet!”

“You murdered the man—you murdered old Bryson!” cried Dipson, maliciously. “And that is why Essie fled from you, sir,” turning toward Allen Bryson with a half whine, like a cur fawning in hopes of escaping a richly merited kick.

“Is this charge true, Benjamin Brown?” demanded Ambry when a slight motion of his head had sent Saul Sunday across the room to put a quietus on Cale Dipson.

There was no reply in words. The murderer, knowing that there was only the hangman’s noose before him should he remain in captivity, saw a frail hope of escaping, and instantly seized upon it.

As Saul Sunday moved from his side in obedience to that silent command, it left the scant space between Brown and the closed window open, so far as human obstacles were concerned. And with a desperate dash the murderer left his chair, hurling himself through the window, taking sash and all with him!

The act was so sudden, so utterly unexpected, that before a hand could be lifted to interpose, Ben Brown vanished from sight, amidst a sharp crash and jingle of breaking glass.

But the hand of fate was under it all.

They found him lying in a limp and motionless heap below the window, already beyond the shadow of the noose. His neck was broken, and his last breath went out even as Saul Sunday stooped over his body.

After examination explained the cause of his defeat. His manacles locked about his ankles, had caught over part of the broken sash, affording resistance enough to destroy his balance, causing his head to strike the ground first, when the weight of his body snapped his neck.

Fortunately for herself, Essie had fainted from mingled excitement and joy at having that frightful burden lifted from her mind, and she was taken away from that house before her senses returned. And it was not until she felt strong and calm that she was permitted to learn of the death which had so suddenly overtaken the criminal whom she had for so long known as and called father.

Dwight Ambry bore Bryson and his wife company to the hotel, leaving Saul Sunday to take charge of Ben Brown, Ross Kearney and his newly wedded wife to retain possession of their house.

But not for long. Early in the morning Dwight Ambry sent them a letter, in which, among other things, he said:

“I have wiped out the score so long laid up to your account. So far as that is concerned, the past is dead and buried, with me.

“But I have one thing more to say: You are safe from arrest for twelve hours from the date of the head of this communication. At the end of that period of grace, I shall openly charge you, Ross Kearney, and you, Sadie Kearney, with being head and front of the gang of counterfeiters which my friend, Saul Sunday, has been trailing for nearly a year. Your partners

in crime have already been arrested, among them Cale Dipson. I have gained you this grace because I had not then entirely forgotten the past. Improve your chance, if you are wise, for Saul Sunday will attempt your arrest the instant the twelve hours expire, and he seldom fails to bag the game he starts after!"

"Even ef I hain't yit run up ag'inst my Seraphina Angelica Lovejoy!" grinned the detective, who waited to see this message read by the pair for whom it was written. "I'd hate to pull you, pardner, fer you showed mighty good grit last night, when you 'lowed all the chances was ag'inst ye. But—business is business, an' I'm its prophet!"

"I've got something more precious to me than my life to defend, Sunday," smiled the athletic gambler. "We'll levant, I reckon, and for your own sake I hope we'll never meet again. If we should—well, I will load my own tools, and not forget to put in the lead, either!"

There is little more to add, before closing.

Dwight Ambry, who was the self-styled "Perry Lawler" who captured Ben Brown after liberally dosing him with drugged whisky, had extracted a full and circumstantial confession from the lips of the murderer before introducing him to the wedding party. He was enabled to prove that Brown really killed Allen Bryson's father, a wealthy merchant, who chanced to detect Brown in trying to break open the safe in his office. Brown escaped then, and as the years passed by without a clew being found, the case was added to the already long list of "mysterious crimes."

The truth might never have become known only for Caleb Dipson, who was a fellow criminal, and who wormed the facts out of Brown while the latter was drunk, then used his power to force a union with Essie.

She overheard their talk, one night, and learned the truth of the elder Bryson's death. She fled from the man she loved, and Brown bore her company, as she told him all she had discovered.

Saul Sunday was trailing a bold gang of counterfeiters, and Dwight Ambry learned that among these criminals were his divorced wife and her lover, Ross Kearney. Hence it came about that the two trailers arranged the little comedy which they afterward played as fully as the hurrying circumstances would permit. Saul Sunday was to pretend to be "shoving the queer," and thus gain admittance to the gang. "The Grizzly" was to aid and abet him, while working out his own plans, principal among which was the recovery of his daughter.

But why waste further space? The story is told, and the few stray threads left flying are hardly worth picking up.

Ross Kearney and Sultana Sate lost no time in fleeing from Falcon City, and that decaying town saw them no more.

Allen Bryson took his wife, now as happy as she had been wretched, back to his eastern home, and they entered a life which bids fair to run for many years, absolutely without a cloud.

Dwight Ambry found his daughter at the convent school, and making sure she was safe and happy, as well as improving rapidly in her studies, he left her in the care of the Sisters by day, having her at home with him by night. For he purchased a cozy little home in the city of the Blacksnake Hills, where he resides at the present writing.

And Saul Sunday?

He lost no time in securing his famous staff and thimble-rigging implements, which he had left in charge of fat Chris Gundelfinger, for, as he declared:

"Thar's that durned ole cuss still a-hangin' over my pore head! They ain't no sech pusson as Seraphina Angelica Lovejoy—Seraph fer short, Angel by them what's'mitted to the inner suckle—but I've got to keep a-goin' ontel I do find her—*wuss luck!*"

THE END.

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